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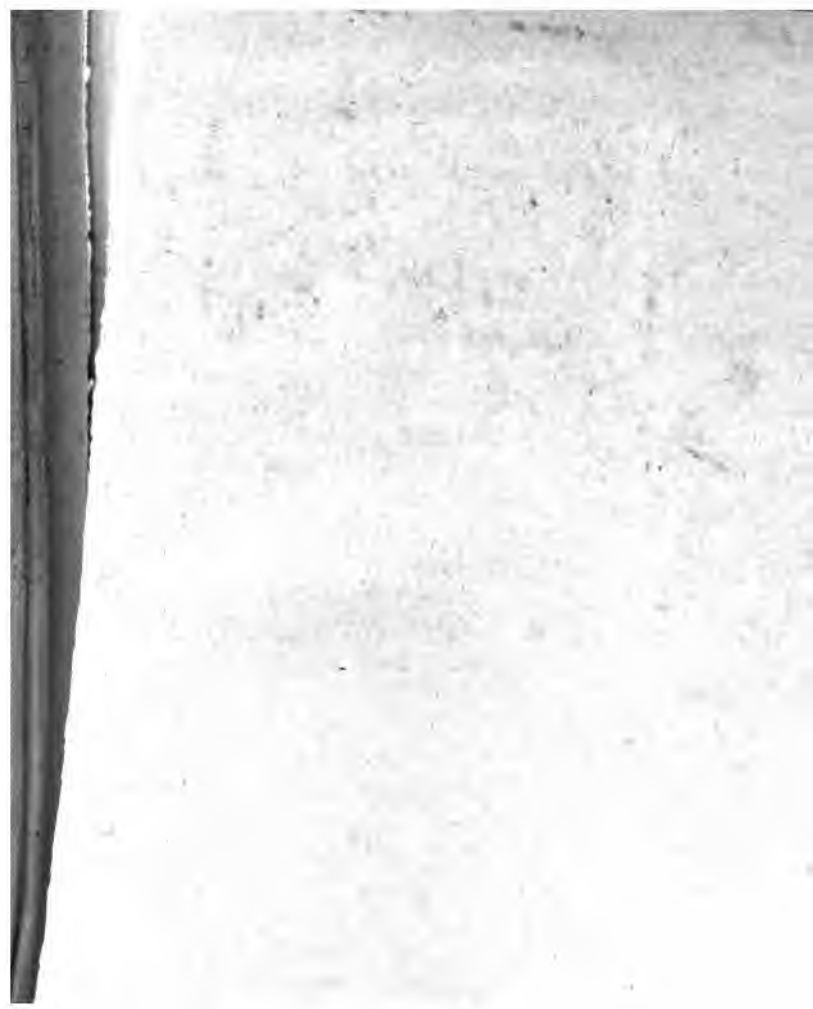
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Hilary on Her Own

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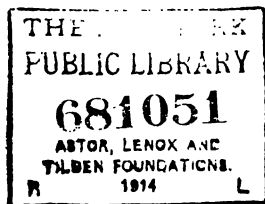
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1908

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Published, September, 1908



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THE PREMIER PRESS
NEW YORK

To Aunt Emily and Lallie

*In memory of my brief and most happy
working days in London*

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Hilary on Her Own



HILARY ON HER OWN

CHAPTER I

I ANNOUNCE TO THE FAMILY MY INTENTION OF LEAVING HOME

IT was on a wild afternoon of February when sheets of hail and snow came thudding against the window-panes that, without any premeditation, I flung my bombshell into the midst of the family, which, without actually removing mother's arms and legs, left her with her head among the sofa cushions in a grievous state of collapse.

It came about thus:

For many days, owing to the wild bitter weather—and we get some hard weather in this corner of Derbyshire—I had been deprived of my country walks over the moors and along the dales, and had been penned up with the family—in the dining-room in the morning, in the drawing-room in the afternoon.

To be penned up with one's family, however virtuous that family may be, is not good for one's soul. And on this afternoon my poor soul felt stretched to the bursting point.

Mother, in a big armchair, with her feet on a newspaper laid on the brass fender to prevent its scratching, and with a brown shawl drawn tightly round her shoulders, sat knitting grey worsted stockings for

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father's thin, bloodless legs—at least she called them bloodless. And father never contradicted anything mother said. And while she knit she talked about the draughts, and suggested to Miranda, my elder sister, the stuffing of cloths and antimacassars into the sills of the east window and under the door.

Father, away from the fire, was reading one of his everlasting zoölogical works, and making notes on slips of paper, which, later, he would indiscriminately scatter all about the house, regardless of mother's protests. The nearest approach mother ever made to being consciously funny was when she told Mrs. Pratt that our house reminded her of a perennial paper chase. While father read he shuffled his grey worsted heels in and out of his shabby slippers, and abstractedly rumped his hair, thereby lending to his dear benign face a somewhat startled expression.

Mick, with her head on one side, and an easel in front, was painting one of those rural scenes of village green and geese in which the amateur delights. She had got to the stage of Chinese-whiting the geese, and was proud of her achievement.

And Miranda was puzzling out a new Weldon's crochet pattern for the adornment of future blinds, a pucker on her pretty, white forehead.

No one spoke, unless one could call speaking mother's audible "knit 3 pearl 5 take off 2 inches" (perhaps it was not that exactly, but it was something like it) and Miranda's "4 crochet, 4 treble, 6 chains." Was it not enough to make anybody's soul burst?

I ANNOUNCE MY LEAVING HOME

Quietly I was edging towards the door, determined to have a walk, if only for five minutes, in the garden, when mother said: "You are not going out, Hilary? It is not fit for a dog." And I returned to my former position at the window and watched the snow heaping itself up against the beech tree. For many days a hard black frost had held the village of Ridgemoor in its icy grip. The lawn sloping down to the river and the valley fields on the opposite bank had been frozen stark and brown. A fringe of icicles hung from the rock whence the tiny waterfall leaps into the river below. The shrubs on the Pratts' lawn looked nipped and shrivelled, and starved thrushes and starlings fought for the scraps thrown morning and night from the kitchen. Our main subject of conversation had necessarily been frozen water pipes, and when tired of that we discussed the price of coal, the riddling of cinders overlooked by a careless cook, and the economy of backing up the fires with slack.

Now the thaw was coming. One felt it in every bone of one's body. The hail was diminishing, the snow becoming softer, the fields and lawn and beech tree were already half hidden beneath a soft white mantle.

Abinadab, the gardener, scurried across the lawn with a bucket of hot food for the fowls, and disappeared round the corner of the kitchen-garden.

I drummed on the window panes, wondering how long it was from tea-time. And father looked at me.

I kicked the skirting-board, and mother told me to stop.

HILARY ON HER OWN

I played games with the tassel of the blind, and Mick said I got in her light.

I glanced at Miranda for sympathy, but she was absorbed in her new pattern.

I looked at the clock, and wondered if mother had ordered hot buttered toast with the tea.

Suddenly I emitted a scream which startled myself as much as the family. It had begun with a bored yawn and ended thus before I could check it.

Father sat up abruptly, allowing his book to slip through his knees to the ground. Miranda ceased crocheting, and Mick stopped painting.

"What is the matter, Hilary?" enquired mother, stooping to search for her knitting needle.

I did not reply.

"Have you got a stomach-ache?" Mother didn't sound as though she was going to be sorry if I had.

"No."

"Well, why did you make that noise? You startled me so that I have dropped several stitches in my knitting."

"I am sorry. But—I couldn't help it."

"It is strange," said she, "to scream for nothing."

"Do you never feel you want to do the same? To rush up a mountain and yell?" I asked, apologetically.

She sat and stared at me. And father leaned forward in his chair, and placed the tips of his fingers together.

"Do you?" I urged. "Do you ever feel you are going mad—you don't know why? That your soul is stifled and cramped—by the narrowness and smallness and sameness of things; through turning heels

I ANNOUNCE MY LEAVING HOME

and taking off toes; through darning and patching and mending; through paying dull calls and receiving dull callers; through worrying about the riddling of cinders and clarifying of dripping and cleansing of the stock-pot; through the ordering and regulating of your household and servants day after day—year in, year out? Mother, do you never feel that madness is descending upon you through these things? And to relieve your pent-up feelings and air your soul your desire is to rush up a mountain, stand with your hair loose in the wind and the rain and the sun, and scream and shout till you feel better?”

“Never!” she replied, breathing hard. “I have never experienced such a sensation in the whole of my life, thank God!”

I laughed.

“No, I don’t suppose you have. But I nearly always feel like that. Mother, father dear”—I crossed the room and stood with my back to the fire, facing them all—“I want to tell you something, I want to ask you something. I want you to give me your permission to leave home and go to London and earn my living as a secretary. I never meant to say this, this afternoon. I was waiting for a fitting season, say when you had been to church and were in softened Christian moods. But it suddenly came to me that I must speak now, at once. The silence and the dullness and the bad weather drove me to it. I felt I might have to spend such another afternoon as this, and the idea was insupportable, and—and the scream broke from me unawares. I hope this doesn’t sound rude, for I don’t mean to be.”

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They were all now staring at me, and mother was the first to speak. "I think it sounds extremely rude, Hilary, and you are talking most foolishly. But I suppose you must have your little joke. Will you ring the bell for Ellen to bring a cloth? The snow is drifting through the window."

Would I ring the bell for a cloth? I must have my little joke! And mother understood me as little as this! I blazed into sudden wrath. "No, I won't ring the bell, and nobody else shall. You must hear me to the end. I am not joking. I am in deadly earnest. I want to leave home and go away and work. Oh, mother, listen."

But mother closed her eyes as though a troublesome insect had walked across her path; and then father spoke in his usual gentle voice. His utterances were so few that they were invariably listened to with attention and respect.

"I don't think she is joking, mother. Look at her face. It is only fair that she should be heard. Let her state her case. The cloth can wait."

"Thank you, father," I cried, eagerly, leaving the fire and sitting down on a hassock at his feet. "I believe you understand. I believe *you* have wanted to scream on a mountain once upon a time; though now you are content to sit so still."

"Perhaps."

"When you were a young man?"

"Yes."

"Your environment irked you? You wanted to do great things? You wanted to leave home and set the world on fire?"

"Yes."

I ANNOUNCE MY LEAVING HOME

"I thought so," I said in triumph, forgetting mother and Miranda and Mick. "And grandfather helped you? He threw no obstacles in your path?"

"No, though he was disappointed."

"Why?"

"He had a fine business, and he wanted me to go into it."

"Into cotton spinning?"

"Yes."

"And you wanted to be a zoölogist?"

"That was it."

"And he let you go to Oxford?"

"Yes."

"Father dear," I said, "won't you talk a little and tell me things? Your sentences are so brief."

He smiled and passed a hand through his beautiful white hair.

"What is there to tell you, Hilary?"

"Everything. *You* left home, and I want to leave home. *You* had a distaste for commercial life, and——"

"You are tired of a domestic life, eh?"

"Yes," mother broke in. "She shirks all her duties if she possibly can. And Miranda spoils her and encourages her. She mends her stockings, tidies her room——"

"I like mending stockings and tidying rooms," said Miranda, "and Hilary does things for me in return. It is *kid pro quo*." She stumbled over her Latin; and mother, ignoring her, continued:

"The blanc-mange Hilary made for lunch to-day was simply uneatable."

"I did it on purpose."

HILARY ON HER OWN

Mother pushed her spectacles up on to her forehead, and when she does this she wears the air of an astonished sheep. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but mother has always managed to look more astonished than most people. It may be that her eyebrows are rather far away from her eyes and very curved.

"You did it on purpose?"

I nodded. "I'm tired of making blanc-manges. When you once know how to make a blanc-mange there is nothing more to be learned about it, all interest has gone. Then the only thing left to you is to try how *not* to make a blanc-mange."

Mother was lost in a great amazement.

"And I want you all to be good housewives," she said presently, recovering a little.

"I know. But, as far as I can see, we shall never get an opportunity of being good housewives to anybody. Besides, I should imagine men don't care for squelchy things like blanc-manges, but have a leaning towards strong meat, such as steak and onions, and broad beans and bacon."

Father smiled behind his hand, but, meeting mother's eye, turned it into a cough.

"All housework is monotonous," I continued. "To make the same bed in exactly the same way day after day is enough to make one shriek. If one could only put the bolster at the wrong end of the bed, or the pillows under the mattress, or the blankets on top of the counterpane, it would make a bit of variety, but one can't."

Mother groaned a little.

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"All girls should like housework and take an interest in it. It is unnatural if they don't."

"Do you think all men are unnatural if they don't hanker after being policemen or solicitors?"

"I don't see the connection."

"I will explain. Most men have to work, but they are not all destined by their parents to the rôle of policemen or solicitors, and we will add cotton spinners. They are allowed, if the parents be wise, to follow out their inclination and individual tastes. Fancy a world entirely composed of policemen and solicitors and cotton spinners!"

Mother refused to fancy anything of the sort.

"But girls are all expected to like doing exactly the same thing—to cook, to sew, to dust. And when they are married, to superintend the cooking, sewing and dusting of other people. Why should all women be dubbed unwomanly if they desire a change of work, something more congenial to their taste?"

Mother didn't know why, but the fact remained, they *were* unwomanly. Besides, if married women refused to look after their houses, who would do it for them?

"Perhaps it is different for married women," I conceded, "but the single ones?"

"Well, they are getting ready for being married. Fitting themselves for the position they will have to adorn."

I shook with impatience.

"And when they have once fitted themselves, mastered all the details of domestic economy—what then?"

HILARY ON HER OWN

"They must sit down and wait," said mother, with an air of triumph.

"And I am not going to wait," I cried, springing to my feet. "I don't want to get married. I am not going to vegetate like a turnip in a field till somebody comes along and removes me. I want to work, to live, to make a career, to see life. Oh, mother! this isn't life, surely it isn't! You say it is because you have lived yours. You have stretched your wings, you have had your fly, but we haven't. What do we do day after day? A little housework, a little sewing, a little walk, dinner. A little walk, an occasional caller, or call to be made, a little talk, tea. A little fancy work, a little reading, wash your hands and change your frock, high tea, tea glorified, tea with game and jam and muffins. A little reading, a little whist, light your candles, and five bored human beings walk up to bed."

"Bored!" Mother's voice was shrill and protesting. "Never. I am always contented. Quite contented. And deeply grateful for my good home, good food, good fires, good——"

"Oh don't, mother dear," I broke in. "Don't mention the good home and food, and fires, and eider-downs and feather-beds. You always heap them up before our eyes till we are nauseated by them. I would rather lie on a bed of straw and have a bit of excitement. Life isn't summed up in the words food, eider-downs. If it is, it doesn't satisfy me. I am weary of my narrow life, of Ridgemoor. I am weary of the people who are so good and kind and dull, who are so moral and so uninteresting. I believe I could even like Mrs. Pratt if she would run away

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with the Vicar. I often crave for an earthquake like the one at Jamaica to shake things up a bit. Can't you understand? I don't want you to think me ungrateful for my blessings, as you term them, the eider-downs and feather-beds, and all the rest. I don't want to hurt you, but don't you understand just a little bit?"

"No," she replied, firmly, "I don't. And I should be sorry if I did. I have no desire whatever to scream, and make beds the wrong way, and have earthquakes. You must be ill. Do *you* ever feel like this?" She turned to Miranda and Mick.

"N-o," replied Miranda. "But I am not nervous, like Hilary."

"Nervous! I call it temper."

Mick giggled.

"And supposing, only supposing, for a moment that we listened to you and allowed you to leave home. What would you do?"

"I should be a secretary, a private secretary," I said, drawing myself up to my full height. "I can write eighty words a minute in shorthand and sometimes ninety when I'm cool. People don't dictate very quickly. The Bishop of Ripon might, but I don't expect to be secretary to him."

"So this is why you have been learning shorthand?"

"Yes."

"I thought you were doing it for amusement."

"Amusement! Is it amusing to learn dates of kings and battles? Shorthand is the least amusing or interesting study ever invented by man. I have simply learnt it as a means to an end. I have sat

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up over it at night in my room. I have risen early in the morning, to cram its stupid hieroglyphics into my head while my brain was still fresh. I have even shed tears over it. Typewriting is playing marbles compared with it."

"And can you typewrite?"

They were all listening—father with absorbed interest. His book lay unheeded on the floor, he leant forward in his big armchair.

"Yes, I can typewrite. It is quite easy." I spoke carelessly, but Miranda told me afterwards that I inflated my chest. "Every time I have gone up to Darkchester during the last six months I have had a lesson in shorthand and an hour's practice in typing. I have gone without clothes and hats to pay for the instruction. Look how shabby I am."

"We don't want to look," said mother, with her eyes on my toes peeping through my slippers. "You have been a disgrace to the family for months. And I imagined all the time that you were trying to be careful, and had a nice little sum in the bank."

"I owe Miranda eleven and sixpence," I said by way of reply. "But I shall soon be earning a nice income. I am going to work frightfully hard when I get to London and have found a post, and most men are very decent——"

"Most men! You want to work for a man?" Mother's shrill voice rose almost to a shriek.

I nodded. "Yes, I like men better than women. I intend being a private secretary to either a literary man—an author or a poet—or a member of Parliament, or to somebody in some public position, such as a field marshal; and, failing that, to a lawyer or

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a doctor. A doctor wouldn't be bad, because operations and things like that are so interesting."

Mother put up her hand for me to stop.

"Hear me to the end," I pleaded. "There isn't much more to say. Dr. Greenup says he will give me a few introductions to some specialists in London to whom he has sent patients. Most big doctors have secretaries; and I thought father would give me an introduction to Professor Weedon; and Mr. Widdicombe would give me one to the Rev. Archibald Tuke and——" But mother was walking across the room to father's chair, and there was something in her gait that caused me to stop and look at her fearfully. Miranda and Mick did the same.

"Antony," she said, stopping in front of father's chair and speaking very slowly—"Antony, *I* shall never give my consent to Hilary's going away and working for a—man in London. Men in London are—wicked, and I call such a proposal simply indecent. What do you say?"

What did father say! Had he ever been known to differ from mother upon any single point since the day they were married? We smiled at the fatuity of the question. He shuffled his feet and worked his heels in and out of his slippers. He ran his fingers through his hair, and then he rose suddenly and confronted mother.

"What do I say, mother? You ask me what I say? Why, I'm—damned if I won't let her go."

A silence, tense and horrified, fell upon the room. Father had used the word "damn," he had sworn. Upon one other occasion only had we known him to be guilty of profanity, and that was when mother

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had accidentally turned the garden hose upon him when she was watering, and he was lying on his stomach in the tall hollyhock bed, examining a snail.

Mother burst into tears.

"I shall send for her grandmother," she said.

"Mrs. Allardyce," announced Ellen, the parlour-maid. And grandmother swept into the room.

CHAPTER II

GRANDMOTHER FIGHTS MY BATTLE

GRANDMOTHER ALLARDYCE was under five feet, and she gave one the impression she was six. She was frail in appearance, and one trembled at her glance. She was nearly eighty years of age and could consume a whole muffin with her afternoon tea, and—without teeth, her habit being to remove them from her mouth and place them in a handkerchief preparatory to sitting down to a meal.

She was dressed on this particular afternoon in a black taffeta gown, a handsome velvet mantle, and a large, round, much befeathered velvet bonnet, from which peered an extremely small white face with sharp, inquisitorial, black eyes and a small, grim mouth. She carried a beautiful sable muff, and an enormous sable stole hung from her shoulders to the ground.

Grandmother always dressed handsomely. She was wont to remark that if mother, her only daughter, arrayed herself in habiliments suitable for a lodging-house keeper she must do something to keep up the credit of the Allardyce family, and impress Ridgemoor with the fact that there was *some* money

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in the family. Grandmother was a Londoner and had settled in Ridgemoor to be near her daughter and grandchildren. "It gave them so much pleasure to have her near them," she would say with her cackling, ironic laugh, and would smile still more at the discomfiture on our faces.

She now took the armchair father offered her; allowed Miranda to put a cushion behind her back; placed her small feet on the hassock Mick pushed in front of her; drew from her pocket a dainty lace-edged handkerchief, blew her nose, and threw a sharp, keen glance in my direction.

"You have been causing your mother trouble, as usual, Hilary. I can see it in your rebellious face and her watery eyes."

My cheeks flushed. "Why do you say as usual, grandmother?"

"Haven't you always been a bit naughty?"

"Certainly not."

She turned to mother. "What are you crying for, Emma? It doesn't improve you."

"Hilary"—poor mother made a sound between a hiccough and a sob—"Hilary wants to go to London and live with a man and be——"

"What?" shrieked grandmother.

"His secretary."

"Oh!" said grandmother, "is that all?"

"Isn't it enough? She says she must go away and earn her own living, or she will become a raving lunatic; and I'm not sure if she isn't one already. For she wants to make the beds the wrong way, and longs for an earthquake, and for Mrs. Pratt—my dear old friend—to run away with the Vicar, he

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with eleven children; and she spoilt the blanc-mange for lunch on purpose, it was just like burnt paste you stick bills on posters; and she is sick of her life and her food and her eider-down and feather-bed, and wants to run up a mountain and scream——”

Mother finished abruptly as grandmother broke into shrieks of laughter.

“Oh, dear, dear! What a child!”

“I can’t see anything funny,” began mother, and off went grandmother again.

Ellen brought in the tea and muffins, and mother dropped lumps of sugar into the cups with an ominous bang.

“And what does father say? Eh, Antony?”

“Father said ‘damn it, she shall go,’ ” volunteered Mick.

“Oh, la! la! How shocking, Antony! I didn’t know you could swear.” She smiled at him affectionately. Father was one of the few people grandmother appeared to care for, though she always called him a feckless booby. “Now somebody tell me exactly what Hilary wants to do. And don’t all speak at once,” she commanded.

And they told her; and while mother talked I found myself wondering how much farther one’s imagination could lead one, and if I really knew myself; or was I as mother saw me, and should I ever do the things she so graphically predicted, and become an outcast upon the face of the earth.

“You don’t understand your children, Emma,” observed grandmother at length. “Hilary will know how to take care of herself. You needn’t be alarmed. But what amuses me is the way she is cheating her-

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self. She may talk about wanting to earn her own living in London, about the dignity of work and other highfalutin' rubbish; about her life and her talents being wasted in Ridgemoor. She may imagine to be a secretary is to be something the nation cannot do without. She may cheat herself and cheat you into believing that to write letters for some man is the one aim and end of her existence. But she is not going to London in search of work. She is going to London to look for something she cannot find in Ridgemoor."

"And what's that?" Mother put down her cup.

"A husband!"

"It's a wicked lie!" I shouted, springing to my feet and nearly knocking over the tea-table. "And you know it is. How dare you? If you were not my grandmother I'd—I'd——"

Grandmother shrank and went a little white. My hand fell to my side.

"I am sorry, Hilary," she spoke very quietly. "I shouldn't have said that. It was a lie as far as you yourself are concerned. I know you had no such thought. But it is true, all the same. This restlessness in young people; this craving for change; this desire for work, is Nature making herself felt. Look at the restlessness and activity of all young things in the Spring. You are young, you are in the Spring of your life; you are bubbling over with vitality. You want something—you know not what. It is the inevitable man."

"I don't want any man," I cried. "The thought of a husband makes me—sick. I shall never marry."

Grandmother smiled sarcastically. "All young

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girls say that. If polygamy were allowed, you'd have six husbands. Emma, some more tea, please, and a bit stronger to buck me up for the occasion. Hilary's flashing eyes unnerve me. I feel as though I were sitting with a pent-up thunderstorm which at any moment may let forth the vials of its wrath upon me. Now to take a judicial view of the case. I should be inclined to think that the shaking of a loose leg on Hilary's part would do her a world of good. The child's getting too big for her buttons, or is it muttons? I always forget. No, it's *revenons à nos moutons*; isn't it, Antony? So the other must be buttons. I should let her go and work as she suggests. What is it you want to be—a housemaid, Hilary? Oh, no, you said a secretary, secretary to a man, wasn't it? An interesting position, pregnant with possibilities." She laughed again, and, seizing a piece of cake, I walked to the window and stared at the gathering darkness and white blur of sleet and snow. The only way of avoiding being rude to grandmother was to escape her presence.

She took no notice of my absence; but, lowering her voice, began to talk to mother earnestly and forcibly, moving her finger up and down, gesticulating, and evidently laying down the law. I knew, of course, that I was under discussion, and I tried not to see or hear. Once I heard her call somebody a fool; it must have been mother, from her aggrieved face, of which I caught a peep reflected in a large mirror. Once she drew father into the discussion, and they apparently agreed upon some point, for she patted his hand and looked pleased.

Miranda and Mick left the room upon some pre-

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text or other. I can never remember an occasion upon which we didn't leave the room when grandmother honoured us with a visit.

Now she was boiling, coaxing, cajoling mother. In my interest I drew a few paces from the window. "If you won't let her go, she'll go without; she'll run away, and then what will Ridgemoor say?"

Grandmother was crafty. Mother minded very much what Ridgemoor said.

"But—but how is she to find a situation?" mother enquired, clutching at any straw.

"Let's ask her."

I was summoned, and the question put to me.

"You are going to call—call on strange men and ask them for work?"

I nodded.

Mother pressed a green woollen antimacassar to her eyes. "Just like a tramp! And without introductions?"

"Dr. Greenup and father and Mr. Widdicombe are going to give me the introductions, I hope."

"And if they don't?"

"I shall call, just the same."

"I like your spirit," said grandmother. "And wear your most becoming frock and hat as it is a man you are going to interview."

"I can't see what my clothes have to do with the matter," I returned, coldly. "I trust that I shall be engaged on my merits only." And for some reason grandmother chose to be immensely tickled by this remark.

"Come now, Emma," said she, turning to mother, "you see how circumspect she is going to be. Give

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your consent. Her father sanctions it, so do I. Mick evidently doesn't care one way or another. Miranda's face, of course, was as long as a fiddle; but then, she has always had the most ridiculous and sentimental affection for Hilary and far more than she deserves—the rascalion. Hilary, at present, doesn't want to go to the North Pole, or Central Africa—that may come later. At the moment London—a five hours' journey—is her goal."

"The North Pole would be far less dangerous," said mother.

"Possibly. But now she only wants your consent to London. Come, Emma, buck up. We are waiting."

Has anybody ever heard the wind sigh through the letter-box of a front door? It is half a wail and half a sigh—and that is how mother said "Very well." The sound of it moved me to sudden compunction, and I bent down and gave her a kiss.

CHAPTER III

MIRANDA AND I INDULGE IN A BEDROOM TALK

I FOUND Miranda lingering in the hall after grandmother's departure that night, and she linked her arm through mine as we walked up the wide, shallow staircase to bed.

We had always shared the same bedroom—a long, low room containing three large windows, two of which looked on to the river and a magnificent copper beech tree, and the third on to the old, grey stone bridge and Windy Hill—the beautifully wooded road which wound away up to the village. We, on this side of the bridge, were in Derbyshire, and Mrs. Pratt, on the other, was in Cheshire, and we were always unduly puffed up at being in the more romantic county.

Miranda's little white bed was close to the bridge window, from whence she could see the postman each morning coming down Windy Hill. Mine was pushed up by the end river window, and I could feast my eyes upon the small weir, all white and foamy with the rush of the water over the big stones. When the river was low one summer George Pratt hopped across the stones from their garden to ours to propose to Miranda—who was sitting deliciously cool in a white frock beneath the beech tree—for the twenty-fifth time. George was always the bane of

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Miranda's existence, at least so she said. If she wore a white frock he proposed, and if she wore a black—and black *does* suit her fair beauty—he did the same. If she were radiant with health he proposed, and if she were swollen up with mumps he did likewise. Personally I liked George, who was kind and honest and good-tempered, but Miranda said he always reminded her of a fat-faced poodle with curly hair and blue eyes.

I had felt selfish in taking the weir window for my bed when we had rearranged the room on our leaving school and becoming grown-up. But Miranda had told me she liked postmen better than weirs, and never felt inclined to lean through the window at night and gaze at the river, which was dark and eerie, and listen to the sougning of the wind through the beech tree; and she was far too sleepy in the morning. And that when she said her prayers she liked to do so in the regulation way to God, and not with rapt eyes and clasped hands to moonlight on water, or sunlight on green fields.

"But God is in the moonlight and sunlight," I would say. And she would reply, not her God. He was on a throne in Heaven in great glory, and certainly not to be found in an unimportant river like the Spray.

Miranda was practical and orderly, above all things. To-night she undressed with her customary methodical deliberation, folded her petticoats, rolled up her corsets, hung her stockings over the back of a chair, and placed her slippers side by side beneath it. Then she donned a blue flannel dressing-gown and took down her hair, which fell in a rippling mass

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over her shoulders. How many times had I not sat green with envy watching Miranda brush her hair! Hers was bright and golden and wavy, just like ripples on a sunlit sea. And mine was dark and so tangled that I could scarce get my comb through it. Father's curliness had a lot to answer for in the shape of bad temper, bad language and broken combs on the part of his second daughter, who inherited some of his characteristics without his sweetness of temper and evenness of disposition. Miranda wore hers parted down the middle, and beneath its waves her face, all lovely pinky white, was beautiful as a Madonna's. While mine, when parted down the middle, transformed me into a German frau—and not a comfortable-looking frau at that, but a thin, peaky one.

Miranda was, undoubtedly, the beauty of the family, and, strange to say, the knowledge of this never caused either Mick or me any envy or uncharitableness. She was so simple-hearted, so humble, so self-effacing, that to know her was to love her.

Now I knew she was longing to talk to me, to listen to my plans, to sympathise with me and perhaps scold me. But she first wanted to be snugly under the clothes. She never could see the sense, she said, of sitting thinking, half-frozen, with your head out of a window, when you could do the same thinking with your head on a pillow. She generally read her Bible and the collect for the day in bed. I liked watching Miranda get into bed. She was so slow and graceful and deliberate. No hurried dash into the middle with the awful feeling that a burglar was clutching at her ankles, but a plump foot carefully

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placed at the side of the heaped-up downiness and the other drawn in slowly after it. Once she said, when, after putting out the light, I had made a frenzied leap through space and landed with my knee against a sharp brass knob shaped like an acorn, that there was not an inch of room beneath my bed for any man to hide there, so crammed up was it with hat boxes and other rubbish, and she couldn't imagine why I got so excited. Miranda never got excited, and I never got calm; to-night my heart throbbed with excitement. I was really going to leave home, I was really going to see the world. I should miss father and Miranda and the river and the beautiful country most frightfully. And, of course, I should be sorry in a way to leave mother and grandmother and Mick. No, I shouldn't. Why should I, even to myself, be such an awful hypocrite? I should be glad to get away from the lecturing and scoldings and misunderstandings and pained surprise at my inadaptability to enjoy my home and surroundings. Mother had never understood me, and perhaps it was my own fault. Or, as grandmother once said, perhaps there was nothing to understand, which observation might have contained truth, but was none the less annoying. But then grandmother appeared to delight in annoying people. She said you got to the bottom of human beings when they were in a temper. You saw their real selves—not the smiling veneer they turned to the world. You became aware of the possibilities or limitations of their characters. "Why bother about their characters?" I asked. "Surely one's own is enough to look after." And she said that depended on the charac-

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ter. If it happened to be purely elemental, like my own, and in no way complex, its interest would be exhausted in ten minutes. And not knowing whether to be gratified or annoyed I surreptitiously looked up "elemental" in a dictionary, and straightway became very annoyed, though I did not let grandmother know the state of my feelings.

Leaning against the window seat, with my eyes on a pale moon scurrying across ragged, sombre clouds, I wondered what had led grandmother to intercede for me this afternoon. Had it been from a sheer delight of opposing mother? She dearly loved a battle of words; still, she might have sided with mother and fought with me. Had not she and I in the past argued upon a subject till I was crying from rage, and she, her small pale face aglow with excitement, her black eyes flashing, cackled with satisfaction at my defeat? I was nearly always the butt of her tongue. Miranda and Mick escaped by acquiescing in almost all she said, and then she simply called them "fools," but let them alone.

My cheeks reddened now as I recalled her words with reference to my desire to catch a husband. She had apologised for them, but she had not taken them back. She had classed me with "other young things." I, whose sole object was to work, to be independent, to make a career; perhaps even to become famous. She should see. Men were well enough in their way. But most of them were egotistical, and few were interesting. I thought of all the husbands I knew: there was the Vicar! And I closed my eyes on the moon and ragged sky, and involuntarily shuddered. Quickly I put the Vicar from me. So kind, so dull,

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so full of platitudes and children. And Mr. Macintyre, so jocose with his pawky humour, so slap-you-on-the-back with his latest joke—and such a heavy slap—thick, podgy fingers and not over-clean. Fancy listening to funny stories over your breakfast, and never being listened to if you want to tell one yourself. And Mr. Jenkins—pretty, neat Mr. Jenkins—with his softly curling hair and gentle voice, and round plump figure and inordinate love of pretty girls and good dinners and himself. Doctor Greenup, of course, was nice in every sense of the word, but one could only think of him as the most charming of fathers and delightful of friends. There were not many men to reflect upon as husbands. Ridgemoor was a growing place, but our circle of friends was limited. Mother and Mrs. Pratt were the social leaders of the village, so we had to be very select indeed. How they had arrived at such an enviable and blissful position one never knew. Mother was an Allardyce! And when mother said she was an Allardyce one instantly thought of people like the Angel Gabriel—the hero of God—or the late Queen Victoria. But father was only a Forrest. Poor father! There had been no Army Colonels or Foreign Ambassadors or Cabinet Ministers in his family tree. His ancestors had owned mills, feared God, honoured the King and led straight, blameless lives. And how often had I longed to be all Forrest. To be part Allardyce was very cramping, and made life a dreary monotony. We were not allowed to know this newcomer or that. That nice breezy young man pronounced sugar like lugger and spoke of people as Smiths and Spencers and Carrs and Bennetts

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without the refining prefix "the." This pretty young woman had broad "o's" and shaky "u's," but sang like a goddess. "But you wouldn't really enjoy knowing such people?" Miranda had queried. And I wondered if I would. They might, at any rate, be unselfconscious and amusing, or of course they mightn't. One didn't know them, so one couldn't say.

"Hilary, are you ever coming to bed?" Miranda's voice was impatient. "There cannot be anything attractive to stare at on a night like this."

"Moonlight in a wild sky is most attractive," I laughed, drawing my head in from the window. "The clouds are racing along, and the sleet is piled up on the window sill, and I believe the frost is returning."

"I can't help it," she returned, snuggling closer under the clothes, "and *do* hurry up with your prayers and undressing. I do so want to talk to you; I'm—simply dying to."

I sat down on my bed and tucked my toes under me. "I'll talk now. I like to look at you, Miranda. You're so pretty in bed, with your hair all waving over the pillow, and I shan't have you much longer."

"That's your fault and not mine," said she, with some asperity, and then: "Oh, Hilary, what shall I do without you? I shall be so lonely—lonely in the day, and lonelier in the night. I knew this was coming. I have foreseen it for months. I've helped you with your shorthand—given you dictation—I knew what it was for, and yet I helped you. I hoped, yes, I hoped mother would never let you go—perhaps it was selfish——"

I got up and knelt down beside her bed.

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✓ "It is *I* who am selfish, but—oh, Miranda, I do want to go so badly, so very badly."

"I know," said she. "And you *must* go. There are some women who always stay at home, and I am one of them. If I marry I shall always be at home—just the same, rooted like a piece of ivy in the back-yard. And there are some women who can't lead a pussy-cat existence; they break through their environment; they go; they are the makers of history, and hundreds of men are in love with them. Look at—look at"—Miranda was as vague about her history as her Latin—"at Madame de Pompadour," she finished triumphantly, and then we both laughed.

"Madame de Pompadour first achieved distinction by becoming the mistress of Louis the Fifteenth," I said. "Is that how you predict I shall arrive at greatness?"

Miranda looked inexpressibly shocked.

"Hilary, don't be so wicked."

"Well, *you* cited Madame de Pompadour. She was a very clever woman, but she was not happy. Always scheming and plotting, and, you remember, towards the end she said: '*Ma vie est un combat.*' I should enjoy a bit of fighting, but not too much of it. Oh, Miranda, it will be lovely earning my own living! Think of the independence, and the fun of looking for work."

"I should hate it," she said. "I should be frightened into fits. The mere thought of calling upon strangers—and, above all, men—would keep me awake for a week."

"But why should you be frightened of men? I shall

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regard them in the same light as women—as prospective employers, and nothing more.”

“Then why not go to a woman?”

I sat and reflected. “Because women, I am sure, on the whole, would be more difficult to work for, more whimsy. Not so just. I like women, as you know——”

“No, I don’t know.”

I looked at Miranda with extreme displeasure. “And you have known me for twenty-two years?”

“Yes,” she said, and then went off into sudden laughter. “Don’t look like that at me. I was only joking. I know you like *some* women, but I am sure you like men better.”

“Mention the men.”

“There aren’t many in Ridgemoor.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, if there were——”

“You shouldn’t generalize.”

“No, perhaps not, but—I wonder how soon you’ll be married!”

I leapt to my feet. “*You*, too, on that tack? Do *you* think I am going away for the sole purpose of catching a husband?”

“No, oh, dear me, no. Hilary, come back; I don’t think it. But I *do* think you will get married; of course”—she met my eye—“of course, it will be an accident.”

“I shall not get married. Nothing would induce me to get married. And the mere fact of you all saying so will make me absolutely refuse to get married—even if by the remotest chance I should receive an offer of marriage. There!”

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I began to undress with great rapidity and dragged down my hair and broke three teeth of my comb in trying to get it disentangled. Then I prepared to get into bed.

"Your clothes are on the floor," Miranda volunteered.

"I know; they can stop there."

"And you haven't said your prayers."

"They must remain unsaid."

Miranda sat up in bed and half held out a hand.

"Are you cross, Hilary?"

"Yes; no."

"I wish you weren't going away. Life will be as dull as ditch-water, and I—I——" Her voice broke, and in a twinkling I was across the room and my arms were around her, and I was kissing her and whispering words of love in her ear and telling her I should never care for anyone—man or woman—in the world as much as for her, and I wouldn't go; I would stay at home and make the best of life and try to be contented.

"No, you must go," she said, wiping away her tears. "It will have to be. I shan't mind after a bit. Everyone gets used to things in time, and I'm always busy and there will be the holidays——"

"I'm a selfish beast," I cried, with sudden compunction. "Selfish to you and selfish to poor mother, and I am going to stay at home."

"No, no," she said. "It would be just as selfish of us to keep you; in fact it would be more selfish of mother," she added, in her wise way. "She has father, and two other daughters to comfort her declining years, and grandmother and three servants,

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and Mrs. Pratt. If you were a son you would most likely of necessity be obliged to leave home; and I never can see why daughters should be expected, if they don't get married, to become fixtures like curtain poles and blinds in their parents' houses."

And in such wise Miranda comforted and salved my conscience, and reinstated me in my own self-esteem. There are some people who have the gift of making you feel that you are right, and they in the wrong, and in their presence you feel at your best and wonderfully stimulated and self-confident. Such people are rare. Grandmother wasn't one of these. She only made you conscious that you were a worm, or a bit of dirt. But Miranda was. In her society you became one of the elect; and it was with such a comfortable sensation I kissed her that night and fell asleep.

CHAPTER IV

PREPARATIONS FOR MY DEPARTURE

THE fortnight following was spent in overhauling my wardrobe, which was meagre and shabby, in propping up mother when she exhibited symptoms of collapse at the step I was about to take—she always spoke of it as a “step”—and in saying good-bye to a few of my more intimate friends in Ridgemoor.

Mother’s face during these days would have moved a stranger to pity. She wore an air of disapproval mingled with patience and toleration. Some day the prodigal would return to the fold, and already in anticipation she saw herself killing the fatted fowl in the poultry yard to spread as a feast before her erring daughter. Roast fowl, sausages and bread sauce would be good enough for any stranger.

When I wanted to dance with glee mother’s roast-fowl-and-sausage expression brought my feet to a staid walk. When I wanted to sing, her glance of “you are going to perdition” checked my musical aspirations abruptly. I felt like a regicide—I mean a matricide—and I was very gentle and meek.

“Where are you going to stay when you first get to London?” she asked one morning. “You won’t get a situation the day you arrive.”

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"To a boarding-house," I replied. "There are plenty advertised in *The Daily Telegraph*."

"To a boarding-house!" I thought she would have fainted straight away.

Gently I recalled to her memory the description of the Bloomsbury boarding-house, at which Mrs. Pratt had stayed the previous summer. It had contained twelve ladies with twenty-five new crochet patterns, including corners; a retired major who was very deaf; and a secretary to the Charity Organisation, with splay feet.

"You wouldn't be there a week!" commented mother.

"Unless the splay-footed young man proved resourceful, and hid the offending members while he engaged Hilary in conversation," said grandmother, who had come down ostensibly with a new recipe for mother of a vegetable salad composed of turnips and nettles by Eustace Miles in *The Daily Mail*, but really to hear the latest news of my movements.

"I shall never consent to a boarding-house, even if your grandmother approves," and there was a finality in her tone which brooked no argument.

I asked where she proposed I should go.

"There is the Young Women's Christian Association——"

"*What?*"

"There is the Young Women's——"

"Now, do I look like a Young Women's Christian Association?" I demanded.

And mother thought I didn't.

"What about Janet Carton in Bedford Park?" suggested grandmother.

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"Oh yes, father's cousin," I broke in, eagerly.

"From what I remember of her," said mother, musingly, "I don't think she would welcome a girl like Hilary in her home. You see, she has daughters of her own."

Mother was successful in making me feel a worm, but not very wormy. I was too happy.

"I might write and suggest it—say, for a fortnight—while you looked about."

"Thank you," I said, humbly.

"But if you go there you will require a new evening frock, as well as a new day gown, for they are rather gay people, and have a large circle of friends, I believe."

"I am going to Sabrina Rowdon's to-day. But I can only manage one; I am low in funds."

"That is owing to these shorthand and typewriting lessons."

"Yes," I said. "Do you think—I was wondering whether there was anything left in the old chest? Miranda had her last evening gown from there, and it is two years since I had one."

"Yes, I know." Mother's face softened and lit up. You had only to mention the old chest in the box-room to see a smile creep into the corners of her mouth. There, stored in lavender, were the old dancing gowns she had worn in London before her marriage. Frocks which spoke of the days when no economy had to be practised, no watching the pennies, no trying to keep the bills down. For grandmother had been lavish and generous to her only daughter. Frocks of a lovely texture, rich brocades, stiff, stand-up-on-their-own silks, expensive lace.

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There was her coming-out gown—a creamy, soft satin—now yellowy with age, for it was over thirty years since mother had made her début. A very different confection from the white silk pongees in which Miranda and I made our first appearance in Ridgemoor society. Then there were a few of her trousseau gowns left—beautiful poplins, fine merinos, and rustling taffetas. How she must have astonished Ridgemoor when she descended upon it! It is said so envious was Mrs. Pratt at the sight of mother's wedding veil that she straightway ordered one similar for herself—though she had been then married for three years, and George was able to walk.

I looked at mother's morning dress as we went up to the box-room, and wondered whether all women came to that; a figured black cashmere, very tight, with a row of shiny buttons down the front of the bodice, ending in a strained effect at the waist line. Did she feel sad? Did she note its contrast with the beautiful soft draperies which she took out of the old chest and shook before my fascinated eyes?

"Mother," I cried, suddenly putting my arms round her neck, "don't you long to wear them again?"

She looked at me in astonishment.

"I? With three grown-up daughters and at fifty-five years of age!"

"Ye-s. I mean, don't you ever want to be young again, and wear something else besides black cashmere?"

She glanced down at her dress. "They are not

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all cashmere; there is my hop-sack and my silk for Sundays. This is only my morning dress."

"Yes, I know. Tell me about the time when you wore this lavender," and I picked up a soft silk with an exquisite lace bertha. "How old were you?"

She sat down, and for a moment fell into thought. When mother thinks, she sometimes looks worried—then you know it is ways and means or the servants. Cook has been putting tea-leaves down the back-kitchen sink, or Ellen has forgotten to put the hearth-cloth in front of the drawing-room fender when she has been "making" the fire in the morning. And sometimes she looks young and almost happy; and then you know she is thinking of her engagement days, or of the time when Miranda pulled through scarlet fever, or of the year when there was such a good crop of plums that Abinadab was obliged to prop the trees.

She looked happy now.

"I was twenty-five, and I met your father for the first time. He wasn't so taken up with his studies then, and he called me 'Sweet Lavender.'"

"How nice!" I said, very softly; I was so afraid of breaking her away from her reminiscences. It was so seldom one could get mother to be anything but practical.

"It was at a ball in Kensington, and he asked me for the first dance, for a waltz."

"And how many more?"

"Oh, we had about——" She broke off suddenly in a shamefaced manner.

"Yes?" I said. But there was no more. Mother had stopped being young for that day.

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"You may have the lavender. I think it would rip up and alter for you. You are slight, and there are plenty of breadths. There must be six yards round the hem." She was measuring now with the forefinger of her right hand.

I thanked her warmly, and wondered how it would suit me.

"It will go with your eyes," said she, reading my thoughts.

"But they are not lavender."

She looked doubtful. "N-o, but they seem to have the knack of changing to any colour you may be wearing—grey, blue, violet."

"What about orange?"

"Ye-s, even a bit orange." And after that I thought it was time to be moving.

"Are you going to Sabrina Rowdon's now?"

"Yes," I said, hugging the lavender to my heart as I followed her down the stairs.

"Tell her to be careful with the unpicking."

"Don't you mind parting with this dress?" I asked, popping my head in at the morning-room door just before I left the house.

Mother stopped counting the stitches in her heel.

"No; why should I?"

"You saw—father in it. I mean you wore it when you first saw father."

"I have seen your father in a great many dresses. Shut the door, please." And I shut it.

As I walked up Windy Hill I met Doctor Greenup in his dogcart, and I waved for him to stop, eager to tell my news; for Doctor Greenup was a friend first

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—you had only to look into his kind, brown eyes to know it—and a doctor afterwards. He had brought Miranda, Mick and me into the world; he had vaccinated us; pulled us through the various childish complaints; sat up for two nights by Miranda's bed when, suffering from scarlet fever, she had hovered between life and death; smacked me when I refused to have my throat painted or my chest rubbed; and was our general confidant and dearly loved friend. Naturally, I had gone to him when a desire for work and to leave home had first seized me. And he had been sympathetic, he had not laughed; he had even encouraged me and had offered, when the time came, to give me what introductions he could to medical men and others in London.

"Why, Hilary!" he cried, in his great, brisk voice. "What's the good news? I thought I had spied a champagne bottle bounding up the hill—all fizzy and bobby and sparkling."

"I'm going to London," I said, breathless. "They've given their consent. I'm going to earn my own living. I'm going to be a secretary to somebody or other—won't he be a lucky person who gets me? And I want the introductions you promised, dear Doctor Greenup. I'm going in less than a fortnight, so you must hurry up. You won't fail me?"

"Fail you! I should just think not. What did your mother say?"

"She wept into a green woollen antimacassar. But grandmother made her consent."

He whistled softly.

"It was as bad as that?"

"Yes."

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He flicked his whip lightly in the air, and looked grave.

"Don't you—don't you think I ought to go?"

"No, I don't say that, but——"

"You think it would be more dutiful to stay at home?"

"I don't even say that. But I think I understand a parent's feelings. You are young and——"

"You can't say pretty. You pause at the word, Doctor Greenup," I laughed, nodding my head.

"You are something more than pretty. You are—dangerous. Now, if Miranda or Rosa wanted to go——"

"Would you let Rosa go?" I interrupted, in astonishment. "Your only daughter?"

He nodded his head. "I should feel quite comfortable about her."

"Do you know, you have all got a wrong impression of me," I said, somewhat angrily. "You think—all of you—that I can't take care of myself. It makes me furious. No one can take care of herself better than I. I have no fear of tramps or mad bulls or——"

"You won't find many tramps or mad bulls in the streets of London," he cut in.

"No, perhaps not, but whatever I meet I shan't be nervous. I am twenty-two years of age. You all seem to forget that, and I am most sedate."

"Oh, are you?" said he, in surprise.

"Yes, when I like to be. I am disappointed in you, Doctor Greenup. I thought you would give me your support. I relied upon you. I have quoted your words. I have told them you were going to support

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me. I have mentioned the introductions you promised. I have dangled you before mother's eyes. I have flung you——"

"Peace, peace!" he cried. "Take breath, Hilary. I will give you the introductions. You shall have them to-morrow. I take back any doubt I had of your being able to look after yourself. I—I am sure you can. I am sure of it." He broke off with a laugh, and I laughed with him.

I leaned up close against the cart.

"You are a perfect dear, Doctor Greenup. No, I don't mind your man being there. I choose to tell you exactly what I think of you. No, I won't. You're vain, as it is. Aren't you? But I *do* like you very, very much, Doctor Greenup."

"Thank you, my dear." He patted my hand which rested on the rail of the cart. "You won't be very long at your work. You'll soon get——" I dared him with my eyes to finish the sentence.

"Gracious goodness! Are you going off again?"

"Every man seems to think a woman's sole aim in life is to get married."

"Well, isn't it?"

"I must hurry," I said. "I have an appointment with Sabrina Rowdon." And Doctor Greenup drove away, chuckling.

"They are all the same," I said, addressing the still, bare trees which, with their dense and gigantic growth, sheltered Windy Hill and the Garden House below from the chill winds which blew down the valley. "They are all the same; there is no originality among them," and pondering thus I mounted the top of the hill, through the big white gate marked

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"Private"—which enables the inhabitants of the Garden House, and Ridgemoor Lodge, namely ourselves and the Pratt family, to live in peaceful seclusion in the valley. Past the canal, with its slow-moving, ponderous barges; a canal as beautiful as the River Spray, winding in parts, with trees, and greenbush banks down to the water's edge, and locks—dozens of them, and when opened a rush of white, foaming water of which any river might be proud. The canal just in the village was not so pretty—for where man is to be found with his mills and works and shops, there beauty ceases to be. And the village was growing, growing fast, and as it grew like all villages it became ugly; and like all sensible people we didn't close our eyes to the fact, for it was too obvious, but we made the best of it. "Come and see our walks," we would say to our friends from a distance. "The village is *not* pretty. Derbyshire and Cheshire architecture is not attractive. Close your eyes just there—now we are past the dreadful mill wall. Yes, mills are very necessary. No, I wouldn't mind owning one if I could tuck it away in a South Sea island where it couldn't be seen. Now we are on the Ridge. What do you think of that? Glorious blue distances. Hills massed up against the sky on your left. The Cheshire plain smiling on your right. Hard to beat, you say? I quite agree with you."

Sabrina Rowdon hinted that I was late, and I meekly agreed, for she was a most important personage in Ridgemoor. Had she not made, and fitted, and ripped and turned for its inhabitants for forty years or more? Some of the more superior people

PREPARATIONS FOR MY DEPARTURE

went up to Darkchester for their frocks, but many of us remained faithful to Sabrina. We liked and respected her, and we all bowed to her decrees. If she said we were "hippy" and mustn't be gathered, we wore plain skirts with a chastened spirit. If she likened us to clothes-props and suggested fullness below the waist line, we flowed and billowed out like fully charged balloons. If she said our arms were red and must be covered, we covered them. And if she said they were white and plump and worth showing, we showed them. We had no false ideas about ourselves in Sabrina's presence. And when we left her we felt like those to whom has been administered a dose of lowering medicine.

I produced the lavender silk with pride, and Sabrina's eye glowed.

"It won't suit you, Miss Hilary, but that won't matter. It's the silk the folks will look at and not you."

"Oh!" I said, trying to keep cheerful.

"It's real lovely," she was feeling the texture and measuring up the breadths. "They don't make silk like this in these days. One of your ma's, I suppose?"

"Yes. I am going away, you know, and I shall want it next week, as well as the grey cloth."

"I'll do what I can, and I can't say more, Miss Hilary. The grey is awful to work at; it's that full of dressin' it near breaks your needle when you're runnin' up the seams. And I am afraid it'll spot. I expect you got it cheap at one of the sales—it's not one of Mendle Wynn's?"

"No."

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"I thought not. Stand more round, please. I shall have to put a bit of paddin' in the hollow near your arm. Eh! you are flat-chested, Miss Hilary. But you'll improve, no doubt. You're young but yet. Now, Miss Miranda she has a nice figger, and she's pretty, too."

I'd begun my dose of lowering medicine, and it didn't taste nice.

"So you're going to London. It's a gay place, I'm told. You'll be getting married, Miss Hilary."

With a shriek I almost ripped off the grey coat.

"Is it a pin?" said Sabrina, with solicitude.

"No, no," I said, hurrying into my old coat and skirt. "It isn't a pin, Sabrina. Good-morning," and I rushed out of the house.

CHAPTER V

WHICH TREATS OF NOTHING IN PARTICULAR

THE afternoon prior to my departure had arrived. My trunk was packed; the lavender silk and grey cloth had been carefully placed beneath layers of tissue paper in the lid by Miranda, who was a good packer. A new grey hat—straw, as Spring was coming—in conjunction with two old ones, reposed in my hat box, which once had been mother's—a tin box, oval and buff-coloured, and of a horrid shiny appearance, and which, though I was not proud, caused me no little anguish of spirit. Oval, buff-coloured, tin hat boxes smacked of working housekeepers moving from one place to another, or of farmers' wives bound for Blackpool, and—I was going to be a secretary. My farewells had been said. Mrs. Pratt had given me a few sound words of advice, in spite of mother's shrug of the shoulders, implying that words of good advice to me were as pearls cast before swine. A few of my childish, treasured ornaments, which had stood on the white-painted mantel-shelf in our bedroom, had been packed away in an empty drawer: the perky cock with red comb and flowing tail; the woolly lamb of rough, corrugated white china with a broken ear, which had shared my bed and affections till I had at-

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tained the age of five years; the ivory elephant with tusks of an alarming size. Miranda had wished them to be removed, and when I asked why, she replied things would never be the same again and, biting her lip, turned away to the window and passed some observation about the weather. My introductions—most precious scraps of cardboard—from Doctor Greenup were safely locked away in my small jewel box. “Doctor Greenup of Ridgemoor introduces Miss Hilary Forrest to Sir Nigel Montmorency of Cavendish Square, London, W.” There were four of them, four different introductions to eminent men in London.

Already I heard Sir Nigel Montmorency saying: “I engage you to come next Monday, if that will suit your convenience, Miss Forrest, at a salary of £2 a week to begin with. No, no thanks; the luck is mine.”

I gave a skip. Kind Sir Nigel. Two pounds a week! I gave a high jump in the middle of the lawn, and mother, who was standing at one of the drawing-room windows, put on her spectacles for a closer inspection. I was saying good-bye to the garden, and quickly disappeared round the bed of shrubs which divides the lawn from the kitchen garden; for no one must see my farewell to the dear friend whose varying moods I loved so well.

“You love it, and yet you leave it,” Miranda had said; and I had nodded, unable to make a reply, at least a satisfactory reply. I did love it, and yet of my own free will I was going to leave it. “All women are illogical,” continued Miranda, in a superior way, and I was obliged to allow the well-worn platitude

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to pass unchallenged. That I was not illogical I was firmly convinced in my own mind. I loved the old place with a deep affection, and yet it was natural that I should wish to know other places and see life. It would do one good, it would broaden one's ideas. Miranda ought to be able to appreciate this, and yet I did not try to explain. It is so difficult to make people understand.

I wandered down a path amongst the cabbages and Brussels sprouts, past the onion bed and along to a stile at the far end, leading into the valley fields. The afternoon was mild; the thaw had released a little spring which fed the stream running between the hedge and the road. Everywhere in Ridgemoor streams were to be found wandering in irresponsible fashion. If they couldn't meet with a convenient channel, they calmly trickled down the middle of the roads. Pale, February sunshine lay along the fields and river. I visioned it all as it would be in the Spring, when green things would be pushing their heads through the earth, and the whole garden would pulsate and throb with the song of thrush and blackbird, and the wondrous murmur of new moving life.

The Garden House had been well named by my Great-grandfather Forrest, who had built it in 1780. Following out the usual procedure, one first builds a house and then tacks on a garden. But Great-grandfather Forrest appears to have reversed this order. He found a garden, and then, close to the stone bridge at the foot of the hill, he tacked on a house. Found, I say, because our garden was never designed by human hands. It had been embellished;

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borders of gay-coloured flowers had been planted; a sun-dial perched on the slope of the lawn; shrubs put in exposed corners to break the wind; but the garden, for the main part, was fashioned by Nature alone. First, was selected a southwest corner in a sheltered valley—a V-shaped corner losing itself in the fields, a corner with magnificent old trees, much older than Great-grandfather Forrest himself, and wonderful velvety grass; no, not grass—sward. Sward is the word. Wonderful, velvety sward sloping down to a river. A slope so sharp in places that unconsciously one held one's breath, for the fear that the parsley and radish beds away in the garden beyond might slip into the river. One felt they should be hook-and-eyed on to something for safety. Hooked to the road behind, or roped to the beech tree which nothing (short of being cut down) could move. A thick growth of blackberry bushes, white fox-gloves, crimson rambler roses and enormous perennial poppies helped to tuck the garden in a little from the inroads of the swift-moving stream below; whilst divers water-growing plants and tufts of bracken helped to cement this encircling hedge. Still the feeling was always there, that a day would come when the kitchen garden, and the horseshoe bed of roses at the bottom of the lawn, would slide gently into the River Spray.

Mother's tidy soul was somewhat grieved and her eye offended by the motley confusion of flowers and vegetables beyond the laurel hedge. Did they come there by chance? Or was Abinadab an artist? Carnations and asparagus grew side by side; sweet-peas sent fingering tendrils amongst tall-growing arti-

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chokes; scarlet poppies flaunted in the potato bed; a golden broom rubbed shoulders with a currant bush; and a sweet-smelling syringa hustled the gooseberries. And while mother's sense of neatness was assailed by this sweet disorder, father gloried in it. While she weeded the carrot bed to help poor, overworked Abinadab, he, father, feasted his eyes on the kaleidoscope of brilliant colour. While she trained up the sweet-peas, or stuck a dahlia, he pulled a spray of crimson rambler over a hazel bush. "You may have your lawn and the flower beds beneath the windows spick and span, my dear," he would murmur gently, when she protested, "but leave this wilderness of beauty to rest my soul"; and she would wonder at people's disorderly tastes.

The house itself was much too large for us, and mother remarked upon this at least once a week—just as though we could all swell up to double our size, in order to fill it. Great-grandfather had made a large fortune in cotton spinning, and was High Sheriff of the County. His coat-of-arms, a grouse on a shuttle, ornamented the decorative iron balustrades of the staircase. Why the grouse, I never understood, unless it was meant to portray the fact that successful cotton spinners could afford to eat grouse.

The drawing-room was mother's special trouble, and it *was* large. It had been great-grandfather's banqueting hall, and was forty-eight feet by thirty-eight. Two big, white pillars supported one end of the room, and the three windows looked on to the lawn and river. The decoration on cornice and frieze and oak door was Greek. The room was undoubtedly

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difficult to heat, and we girls had many secret yearnings for tea in the cosy morning-room above; but mother said no, a drawing-room was the correct room for an afternoon when callers might be expected, and if Mrs. Pratt were to drop in and find no fire she would never forgive herself; and that if we lived in a house too large for us, and beyond our means to keep up properly, it was not her fault. (Though nothing short of an earthquake would have removed her.)

Father had been the eldest of several sons, and when he inherited the Garden House from *his* father, the fortune that came with it was not large. But he loved the old place with a deep affection; and mother might pretend to talk, to entreat, to threaten, but she knew that nothing would persuade him to budge from the house where he was born, and no stranger would reside there in his place. He was a zoölogist, a thinker, a dreamer, a man most gentle and patient, but there were occasions on which he could be stubborn, and he meant to end his days at the Garden House. Without protest he made over the whole of his income to mother to manage. She was cleverer than he, he admitted, and readily agreed to her proposition that he didn't know the value of money. There were times when he was without a penny in his pockets. I have known him dive into them at the entreaty of a beggar or organ-grinder, and draw a blank with a rueful, whimsical smile. Should new gravel be required on the garden walks, mother was gingerly approached by Abinadab. Were bedding-out plants the goal of his ambition, she decreed the number of geraniums and calceolarias

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that were to be purchased. Should father's knees bag and elbows shine, and should he even chance to consider a new suit of clothes desirable, mother would march him up to Darkchester and select the cloth and the cut. Vanity was not one of father's besetting sins, and he had been known to wear with cheerfulness an alpaca coat fashioned by mother's own fingers. And he was more than content that the reins of government should be in her capable hands, so long as he was left in peace with his books and flowers and the rearing of chickens.

But we were perceivably hard-up, or mother said we were. We backed up the fires with cinders, saved the minutest scraps of soap, darned patches—and a darned patch to an artistic eye is enough to bring the tears to it—made our own soft soap, furniture cream, baking-powder and browning. And on soft-soap days father, with a handkerchief to his nose, would seek refuge at the bottom of the garden. In fine, we practised every economy devised by mother, with an assumed cheerfulness. If the making of soft soap and browning for gravies would keep us out of the workhouse, by all means let us make them. Mother was a lost Chancellor of the Exchequer! One trembled at the thought of her budgets, of her cheese-paring policy, had she been appointed to the high places of the earth. But I will say we kept up appearances. We might dine off a scrag of mutton, and boiled macaroni as pudding, but they would be handed by Ellen, the parlourmaid, and Ann, the “'tweeny,” in India-rubber collars and cuffs, and on silver entrée dishes—the mutton, of course, in the entrée dish. Also, we always took our meals with four

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silver vases of flowers, a centre pot plant and a paper table centre—with a painted satin one for best. Also, Ellen was not allowed to put potato and cabbage dishes on the table, or food of any description. All must be handed: the common bloater, the economical sprat, the pickled onion. We might be poor, but we were proud.

Below, in the enormous, old-fashioned, stone-flagged kitchen, great-grandfather had erected a water-wheel which turned five spits which roasted five joints of meat all at the same time before the great open fire—barons of beef, saddles of mutton, quarters of lamb, sucking pigs, bears' heads. Involuntarily one licked one's lips at thought of them. But possibly he possessed no entrée dishes, or table centres, or four vases of flowers. There is compensation for everything.

Mother's distressed face when the bills came in always moved me to pity. They were paid on the nail, they were paid by return of post; there was the money to pay them, and yet she worried. The gas bill was worst of all. Miranda said that when mother began to talk about the gas bill she could not prevent her thoughts from wandering. When people rejoiced that Spring was coming and the days lengthening and the sun shining, mother rejoiced that the gas bill would be less. Gas was four and sixpence a thousand, she said, and there was no getting over that fact. It was iniquitous; it was bad gas, it was smelly gas, and yet we couldn't do without it. Lamps in our large rooms would be as glow-worms. Spring was coming now, it was not hurrying, Springs never do hurry in Ridgemoor; still it

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was coming, and the gas and coal bills would be less. I had ventured to mention this when mother doled me out some money for my journey to London, and for my expenses until I found work.

"Five pounds is not very much, mother," I had said, hesitatingly.

"It is as much as I can afford."

"The days are lengthening, the gas bill——"
Mother pretended not to see the connection.

"My fare and cabs will come to over a pound," I ventured next.

"Yes, but I cannot manage more, Hilary. You can stay at home, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"And you will soon be earning a good salary. Two pounds a week, you thought."

"Yes" (faintly).

"And you are going to Cousin Janet's for a fortnight. She wrote a very kind letter."

"Yes."

"And your expenses cannot be very heavy during that time. You will meet with a post so quickly, you say. In fact, as far as I can see, you will be saving money."

I felt unequal to grappling with mother's arguments. There are times when one's spirit fails.

I was pondering on all this, wondering what I should do if my money gave out before I was settled. Supposing that, after all, I were not rushed at by notabilities requiring secretaries, where should I go for help? To whom should I apply? I wouldn't come home. Starvation would be preferable, or selling violets or boot-laces at street corners. Which

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ould be the more paying? Boot-laces I had dedded upon as being a necessity and not a luxury, and therefore more in demand, when a step sounded n the distance, and father came slowly down the path. He wore his top-coat, and his hands were full of cabbage-roots. Taking a sharp penknife and a firm, fat root he proceeded to shave off the outside dirty skin, exposing a nice, white, juicy substance which he cut into minute dice, placing them in a tin bowl. He cut up three roots in this manner, and threw the rest away to the leaf-mould heap which stood at the bottom of the parsley bed.

"Is it for the chickens?" I enquired.

He nodded.

"I can't imagine how such tiny creatures digest it."

"They are a month old," he said, proudly. Father would never be satisfied till a brood was hatched on the first of January. No matter how much they had to be kept in from the cold and frost, how much attention they required, how much warmth and care, he would worry away at the poor hens till they *did* produce early chicks.

"Aren't you cold, sitting on that stile?" he enquired.

I shook my head.

He picked up the bowl of potato mince and hesitated. Then he walked away. Half-way down the path he hesitated again; then he walked back.

"You haven't very much money, Hilary, to go away with?" His eyes were on the river.

"No, father," I returned.

"I—I took this sovereign from your mother's

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dressing-table this morning." He handed it to me with his eyes on the sky.

"Thank you, father, but won't mother sus—won't she miss it?"

"I think not. There was a little pile of sovereigns, and she counted them so often she seemed to become confused. She is often like that over things she has put away very carefully—she forgets where they are when she comes to look for them."

I turned away my face till it was quite grave, but he was still gazing at the river.

"Thank you, father," I said, "thank you, very much." He walked away a few paces, and again he returned.

"It is not stealing," he said, a little anxiously. "It is, it *is* my own money."

"No, it is not stealing, dear father," I said, warmly. "I am sure it is not stealing."

And with a relieved air he walked away to feed the chickens.

CHAPTER VI

I SAY GOOD-BYE TO THE FAMILY

THE whole family saw me off from the Central Station, Darkchester.

When father appeared at the front door and stepped into the cab after mother, Miranda and me, and told Mick she must walk up to Ridgemoor station and there was plenty of time, we almost collapsed with astonishment. Father had not been up to Darkchester for two years, and we had not seen him in a top-hat since he went to Mr. Pratt's funeral. I felt indeed it was a red-letter day, and I put my hand into his and gave it a little squeeze.

Mrs. Pratt waved to me from her front door. Not a cheerful wave, but like a flag at half-mast, and at sight of it mother's mouth quivered.

"There's a chaffinch, Spring is coming," I cried, trying to be cheerful.

Mother drew her mantle together and turned up her collar. "I call it bitterly cold, gloomy and cheerless; there will be a fog in Darkchester," she predicted.

"But there *is* a chaffinch," I persisted.

Mother remained unmoved and told me to put my hat straight.

"You are kicking me," she said, presently. "Do try to be calm."

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Calm! She might as well have told a forty-horse-power motor car with a level track ahead to be calm.

Rosa Greenup was at Ridgemoor station and—grandmother. I kissed the former good-bye and held my cheek to grandmother.

"I am coming with you to Darkchester," she said, curtly, and got into the carriage like a girl. She was gorgeously dressed in purple velvet and sable. "You are sure to travel third-class, and I knew the family would be dressed like widows and orphans"—she gave mother's attire a comprehensive glance—"so thought I would try to give the send-off a little *éclat*."

"Thank you," I murmured.

"Going to a lecture, Antony?" she enquired, pleasantly, "or a funeral?"

"I am going to see Hilary off."

"Dear me! What a commotion the child is making! Feel happy, Hilary?"

"I should like—to live forever."

"Gracious goodness! Your hair would grow grey, and your eyes become dim, and your teeth drop out."

"Your eyes are bright enough, and—you put your teeth in a pocket-handkerchief."

Grandmother gave a little gasp, but she looked pleased. "I suppose because you are going to London you think you have a right to be impertinent?"

"She has been like that for days," said mother. Grandmother grinned.

"And so you are going to your first cousin with a remove, Janet Carton?" She had known this for some time, but wanted to draw mother.

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"Yes," said the latter. "I never thought she would take Hilary in, and with daughters of her own, too. But she sent a most kind invitation."

"You mean Hilary might cut them out?"

"Oh, no"—mother shook her head—"I didn't mean that. Miranda might, now."

"Not at all, Hilary would be far more likely," shouted grandmother; and mother leant back against the cushions and closed her eyes.

"Have you got any nice frocks?" she demanded next.

"I've got a useful working one——"

"I don't want to hear about your working ones. Have you anything pretty?"

"Mother's grey lavender silk from the old chest has been altered, and it looks——"

She held up her hand and told me to stop. "I don't want to hear about that old chest; it's like a widow's cruse. Here we are. Darkchester looks more attractive than usual—ugh!" Fog hung in the dome of the station, a chill wind blew down the platform, and the atmosphere was damp and depressing.

"Your luggage isn't exciting. Where did you raise that hat box, Emma?" Grandmother poked it with her umbrella.

"I did not see the sense in Hilary taking the best leather trunks when she is only going to be a working girl." Mother said "working" in the same way people say "mill."

"But she is going to Mrs. Carton's first."

"Cousin Janet won't value people for their appearance."

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"Some people do. You wouldn't get credit at any shops this morning with that moulting feather in your bonnet."

"I shouldn't try. I pay cash down for everything, and can account for every penny."

Father suddenly went uncomfortable, and strolled away to buy a paper for me.

"Don't you think Hilary had better get in?" suggested Mick. I kissed them all in turn, and for the first time a lump came into my throat as I put my arms round Miranda and she clung to me. "Oh, Hilary!" she whispered. "What shall I do without you? You'll never forget to write?"

"I'll cut off my hand if I do, dearest." And my eyes were suddenly blinded with tears as I got into the carriage. They all crowded round the door.

"I still most strongly disapprove of the whole thing," cried mother, despairingly. "And I am sure no good will come of it. For a young girl to be alone in London—why, it's courting—courting disaster." She handed in to me a packet of damp, foggy sandwiches, and took out her handkerchief.

"I've ordered a luncheon basket," said grandmother, grimly. "Sandwiches are not attractive on a day like this; besides, people who eat sandwiches in trains, well—they're beyond the pale of my thinking. What have you got, Antony? *Forget-me-not?*" She spluttered into her handkerchief. "Hilary reading *Forget-me-not!* Get her *The Pink Un* or *The Winning Post*. Oh, la! la! You parents are behind the times. You don't know anything about your children."

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The ticket examiner politely asked her to move on one side. "St. Pancras, miss? Right."

A woman and small child came along the platform and got into my carriage.

"Protection," said grandmother. "She'll be all right, Emma; that child will keep the men away—a baby would have been better, though."

"Oh, Hilary!" Mother bent forward eagerly. "Talking of protection reminds me, always walk quickly when you are in London, and always carry a parcel and an umbrella. They will be a safeguard."

"A parcel and an umbrella!" I repeated.

"Yes, a parcel and an umbrella."

Grandmother leant against father for support, and gently rocked. The carriage door slammed, and the train slowly began to move.

"A parcel and an umbrella," repeated mother, mechanically, as we began to get up speed; and I am convinced that an old, very foreign-looking gentleman who was standing on the platform imagined that "a parcel and an umbrella" was equivalent to "*bon voyage, ma chérie*."

The first part of the journey was interesting, if not even exciting. The Midland Railway knows how to do things; it also knows how to give you a thorough good shaking up. We rocked through the Peak Country, flew down hills, whizzed round corners, and shrieked through tunnels. With my face glued to the window I admired the flying scenery, the bleak frowning hills, the grey stone walls, the bare trees massed against the sky, the snug valleys and the brawling rivers. The rush of the train excited

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me, the keen air exhilarated me. I was going out into the world; I was going to the unknown. I stretched out my hands through the open window. I was free, and I laughed aloud. Then I found the small dirty-nosed boy was staring at me, but I knew in any case he would have stared at me; that class of child always does. When I became tired of his unflinching, black optics I crossed to the other corner of the carriage and then he stared at me sideways. I resigned myself to the inevitable—he was going to London, I had heard the woman say so, so I must submit to being stared at for four and a half hours, unless by good luck he should happen to fall asleep.

I took up *Forget-me-not*. We had passed Derby and the country now was uninteresting. I read a thrilling story, a real love-story, about a girl with hyacinth-blue eyes and black curling lashes and dusky starlight hair; and a young man with an amber moustache and dark curly hair with copper lights—no, perhaps the girl had copper lights—till I became hungry. So I dragged my luncheon basket from beneath the seat and fell to eating cold chicken, ham and lettuce and a cob and butter. The small boy's eyes naturally now fell out, whilst his round cheeks blanched with envy, so ingratiatingly I offered him a chicken leg. He might look at that for a change, and give me a rest. But this device didn't work. He sucked his bone and still stared. I tried (when his mother wasn't looking) the effect of pulling faces, but this simply fascinated him, and he chuckled with pleasure. So I gave it up as hopeless. Why couldn't he want to kneel against the window

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and look at the moo-cows, and gee-gees, and chuck-chucks, like other sensible children?

I finished my lunch, returned the basket to the floor, propped myself up in my corner and closed my eyes. I would think of them all at home. I would try and feel sorry for "the step I had taken." I would think of my work; I would plan out my Summer clothes. But the child mesmerised me; I thought only of him. I opened my eyes and found he had crawled along the carriage seat and was sitting close by my side. His mother had applied her handkerchief to his nose, and he was really rather a pretty little chap and appeared to have taken an extraordinary liking for me. My heart softened, and in a wild and reckless moment I put *Forget-me-not* in front of my face, peeped round the side of it, and suddenly yelled: "Peek-a-boo!"

I admit, now, it was a foolish thing to have done, an idiotic thing to have done, for I had to romp with that blessed infant the whole of the rest of the journey to London. We played lions, we played pick-a-back, we played peek-a-boo, and I arrived at St. Pancras in a heated and dishevelled condition. I could scarcely persuade him to leave me then, and his mother was obliged to use some force to drag him along the platform. I waved till he was lost to view, and then turning to collect my luggage encountered the amused gaze of two ladies.

The elder advanced and, offering me her hand, said: "You are Hilary Forrest, are you not?"

It was Cousin Janet and Juanita. In searching about for a suitable description of Cousin Janet Carton I can think of nothing but a well-made, neat

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feather-bed. A bed with a starched, glossy counterpane, frilled pillow shams, and neat valances. She was the largest, stoutest person I had yet come across, and her flesh was the kind that is firm and unyielding. She billowed in a round evenness from the neck to the waist, and she billowed evenly again from her waist to her feet. She was dressed in a tight check black and white tweed. There would have been sufficient room in the front of the skirt for four people to have played draughts. She was amazingly neat and shining. A kitchen maid might have just rubbed her up with Globe polish. Her face shone, and her eyes shone, and her boots shone, and I liked her. She was kindly and good-humoured, and easy-going—it was easy to see that. She took my hand in her large, shining glove and squeezed it. Then she said, with an air of proud ownership: "This is my elder daughter, Juanita."

Now, if I was interested in Cousin Janet, I was fascinated with Juanita. Could two people have been more unlike? Juanita was tall, and thin, and graceful, and she wore artistic, green, trailing garments, and a green tulle hat of nondescript shape with a sweeping feather was perched on her luxuriant brown hair. She was not exactly pretty, her features were irregular, her complexion was sallow, but there was a something about her which made one look and look again. What was it? I cudgeled my brains for a reason. I knew. She had an air. Sir Willoughby Patterne had a leg; Juanita had an air. She was distinguished, she was aristocratic.

"Have you your luggage?" she enquired after shaking hands. "We have engaged a cab."

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"I told a porter to collect it," I replied.

"It will come," said Cousin Janet. "Never worry about luggage; it always turns up if you don't worry. The porter will find us. We will get into the cab."

"But I don't think he will know which my trunks are; and—yes, I am sure I see them on the next cab. No two people will have yellow tin hat boxes in these days."

Juanita laughed.

"Tell the cabby to fetch them," commanded Cousin Janet. "They haven't gone far wrong. Now, if we had gone chasing to the luggage van, they would probably have driven away." She leant back with a finished air and crossed her shiny black gloves on her knee, or the place where one supposed her knee to be.

"I am so glad you have come, Hilary," said Juanita, patting my arm in a friendly little way. "We have always wanted to know you girls. And we are quite gay just now. There is a dance on at the club to-morrow—we have a jolly little club at Bedford Park—and we are short of girls."

"Short of girls!" I exclaimed. "What an astonishing thing. We are always short of men in Ridgemoor, and about twenty girls to the good; and the men put on such airs."

"Is that why you have come away?" asked Cousin Janet. And when I replied stiffly, "Certainly not," she seemed quite surprised.

"Mother didn't mean that," said Juanita; "she is always saying things that people take the wrong way. She never means any of them. Do you, mother

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dear?" Juanita had a deep voice, singularly attractive, and she spoke with lazy deliberation.

"How soon are you going to begin work, Hilary? We want you to play round with us first, if you will. We are very lazy people. We play when we can, and only work under compulsion."

"How nice!" I laughed.

"But I thought you wanted to work."

"Yes, but I enjoy playtime. People only work in Ridgemoor. Darkchester is a working place. And its inhabitants slave away to make money—it is bred in our bones—and we die before we have had time to enjoy ourselves."

"What a pity! Here we are at King's Cross."

Within an hour we were at Bedford Park. Everybody knows Bedford Park, with its pretty red-roofed houses and dainty green gardens filled with flowering fruit trees, with its level roads and avenues of almond trees, and trim hedges.

Juanita talked of the people during the journey down. Such a charming set! Some were Bohemians—artists, poets, actors. Poor for the main part, but with brains and an enormous fund of humour and keen sense of enjoyment. They got the best out of life, and laughed at misfortune. Their houses were a bewildering mixture of Old English-French modern art. But the sum total, if bizarre, was pretty and uncommon. Their doorways were hidden in out-of-the-way places. Their fireplaces consisted of a cauldron in a hole—pretty, but not heating. Liberty canvas covered their walls, enormous old settles—discovered in public-houses—kept out the air and light, ricketty Chippendale and Sheraton chairs

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gave way beneath the stout and unwary sitter, and coffee was handed in Turkish cups which burnt your unsuspecting fingers.

"They don't pay their bills," said Juanita. "It is not that their souls are above such petty commercialism, but Art is not remunerative. After a while they drift into Gunnersbury, or Streatham Hill, or Clapham, and we lose sight of them, and we are sorry, for they were very jolly while they were here."

"And were they economical?" I enquired. I was unaccustomed to people who didn't pay their bills. What I was accustomed to was instantaneous payment and an abundance of talk thereat.

Juanita lifted her level eyebrows.

"The artistic temperament economical! It would spoil its charm!"

"People live on a pound a week in the North, and save out of it. Everybody 'lays by.' The rainy day is never absent from our horizon. We are all so bent in saving up for our old age that we have no time to enjoy our youth. We live on tinned salmon and leave half a million."

"Dear me!" said Cousin Janet. "How extraordinary!"

Arrived at Turnham Green station we took a cab to Cousin Janet's house. And I must pause here to refer to my first encounter with Dorothea. The road ran alongside a green commonly called *the green*, and across this ran a girl. I was attracted by the peculiar run of this girl. At first she would take a few lagging steps; then, as though she had a train to catch and had suddenly remembered it, she would break into a terrific spurt. Then more slow, lagging

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steps, followed by another spurt. So interested was I in her movements that I put my head through the window to watch. Juanita's eyes followed mine, and to my surprise she cried: "Why, it's Dorothea!" She hailed her, and the cab stopped. Dorothea ducked under the railing, and came up with a final sprint. She was a little breathless, and had lost a lot of hair-pins. She expressed great surprise at our being there at all. "Did you catch an earlier train?" she demanded, looking at Cousin Janet a trifle severely. And when Juanita said "No," she observed, "Dear me, my watch must have gone wrong again," with such a comical expression that we all laughed.

"Drive on!" she shouted so suddenly and unexpectedly to the cabby that he nearly, judging from the sounds, fell off his seat. Then she set off at another run, which didn't seem to surprise her mother and sister in the least.

"Thea always walks like that, and is such a dear," observed Juanita. "I don't suppose she'll be home for ever so long. She is sure to meet somebody we know, and she is so frightfully interested in everything and everybody. There, she has stopped! It's Mrs. Trimmer, our laundry woman. It's all up. Mrs. Trimmer has seven children, and Thea is god-mother to two."

"I don't think I shall keep her tea hot to-day," said Cousin Janet, meditatively, "as it's Mrs. Trimmer."

"But she likes it cold, the same as her porridge," laughed Juanita as we drove up to the door of War-raby in Linden Avenue, which was smartly answered by a maid-servant named Belinda. Belinda! I might

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have known Juanita, who was one of the few artistic people left in the Park, would have something to do with a Belinda, or Pamela, or Olivia. In Ridgemoor our servants were all called Jane, or Ellen, or Mary.

The hall was of light-coloured parquetry, and the drawing-room floor was of polished oak, upon which old Persian rugs were laid. I could see Juanita in the rugs and quaint, hammered-copper fender, and Cousin Janet in the satin rose- and lily-embroidered cushions. Soft, blue-silk casement curtains hung at the windows, which were pretty and diamond-paned, with wide, comfortable seats at their base. In front of one of these knelt a fair, good-looking young man with lazy blue eyes and thin clean-shaven face. He was introduced to me as Tony, or "I beg your pardon, Mr. Tony Laxenby," said Juanita. He bowed and shook hands, and then, turning to Juanita, said: "I've done it." There was a Eureka triumphant note in his voice which made me feel curiously sympathetic. He had done it. Why shouldn't I?

"Oh!" said Juanita, apparently unmoved.

"Yes, it took me over an hour, but I've got him there. Look, here's the sty and here's the pig."

"Very clever of you." Together they leant over a small puzzle he held in his hand.

"Could you do it again?"

"I think so, but he's an infernal tricky chap."

Cousin Janet joined them now. And I sat gaping. Yes, Juanita was right. They knew how to play. My thoughts flew to the Garden House, to mother, father, Mick and Miranda with their crochet, knit-

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ting, painting and zoölogical works, and I gave a sudden little laugh.

"Jolly things puzzles," said Mr. Laxenby, handing cups of tea and bolting slices of bread and butter in between.

"Ye-s," I agreed, "but I don't think I know many."

"I'm always buying 'em. There's the bottle and glass, and bunch of keys, and hen and eggs, and fox and geese, and flies and marmalade; but this pig in the sty is about the best. I thought it out in bed last night."

"Tony never does anything useful," explained Juanita.

"And what about you?" he said, equably.

"It doesn't matter so much for a girl," and she lazily shook her head. "A girl works really hard in choosing new clothes and hats, and trying to look nice. But we are going to have a good example set us by my Cousin Hilary. *She* is going to work, and there is no occasion for her to do anything but amuse herself at home."

Mr. Tony Laxenby fixed a monocle in his left eye and stared at me, not rudely but interestedly. "You don't look philanthropic," he said, at length, "nor political; you don't look robust enough for either. Perhaps it's nursing—but that's hard work."

I shook my head. "No, I'm going in for secretarial work."

"Goodness! And are you going to do that for fun?"

"Not altogether. I hope to make my living out of it."

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"And—I don't wish to be impertinent, but you needn't do it. Your father has plenty of the needful and all that sort of thing."

"Plenty," I laughed, "and my mother is very much against my leaving home."

"It's astonishing!" He dropped the pig puzzle. "Never heard of such a thing in my life."

"I think Hilary found Ridgemoor a trifle dull," said Juanita. "It's right in the country, some miles from Darkchester. And it rains so much in Darkchester, I'm told, and the leaves come off the trees so early in that part of the world."

Mr. Laxenby nodded. "And how have you succeeded in meeting with a secretaryship, may I ask? I once looked for work myself, because people"—he looked at Juanita—"suggested I was leading a wasted life, like the person in *Nothing but Leaves*. But I became so discouraged at the end of the first week I gave it up. I answered dozens and dozens of advertisements, but nobody took the slightest notice of my letters, and nobody rushed at me. So, objecting to be a drug on the market, and a good man, too, I decided to stay at home. A relation left me about £500 a year, and, by practising rigid economy, I can just scrape along. My man Barnet happens to be a clever, resourceful chap, and manages to keep me out of gaol."

"And you have sufficient leisure to devote to coaxing pigs into styes?" I observed, gently.

"That's it," he agreed, looking at Juanita. And, on reflection, I found he looked at Juanita quite a lot, with which I sympathised, for Juanita was a very personable person, as I remarked before; and was

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even nicer without a hat than with—for her hair was most charmingly arranged in one thick plait drawn right round her shapely head, forming a dusky halo with threads of bronzy gold showing here and there, just like the girl in *Forget-me-not*.

And at this point Dorothea came into the room with a rush, and, stopping abruptly, stared at us abstractedly with her head on one side.

"Yes, Thea?" said Juanita, encouragingly.

"Oh, I was only thinking——"

"Yes, dear. We can see that. What about?"

"Do you believe in total immersion at baptism?" she turned on me suddenly.

"Yes; no. Really I haven't considered it," I replied, flurriedly.

She sat down heavily. "Mrs. Trimmer is becoming a Baptist; her convictions won't allow her to be anything else. She is going to be immersed, and the children—seven of them—they are all going to be immersed."

"Oh!" I said, politely, as nobody spoke.

"And the baby," she said, as an after-thought.

"He, too, is going to be immersed, totally immersed." And she fell into thought with a perplexed brow.

CHAPTER VII

A VISIT TO AN EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

I FOUND the Cartons amazingly attractive. They were so light-hearted, so gay, so original and clever—at least Juanita and Dorothea were clever, and, above all, so sympathetic. From the amount of interest they showed in my plans, and the energy they displayed in suggestions as to the best methods of obtaining work, they might have known me since the day I was born.

On the morning after my arrival, Dorothea made a bee-line for *The Telegraph*, in order to search the advertisement columns. My introductions must wait and be reserved as sort of life-belts when all else had failed. At any moment I might meet with an engagement to a prince or prime minister; then I should be sorry to have thrown myself away upon a mere specialist in Harley Street. Sir Nigel Montmorency of Cavendish Square and Mr. Owen Westcott of Wimpole Street sounded attractive, but probably they didn't keep secretaries, and if they did would pay them badly.

"Doctors are poor," she said, wisely; "nobody ever pays their bills, and everybody wants to be seen for half-price. 'Wanted . . .'" She ran her eye down the columns. "'Wanted—A companion to in-

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valid lady. Must be strong and a teetotaler. Good references. Mental case.' That won't do. 'Wanted—Male nurse for county asylum.' Nor that. Here we are—her voice rose excitedly: 'Wanted—A young lady to act as private secretary to literary man. Position of trust. Shorthand and typing imperative. Good salary. Apply personally 22c Regent Street, W.' "

"Finish your breakfast," said Cousin Janet, as I bounded from the table. "There's no hurry."

"Hundreds will apply for that post." I hurried to the door. "Please excuse me,"

"Wait," cried Juanita. "Come back, Hilary. If you'll sit down for five minutes I'll come with you. I don't think it's proper for you to go alone to a—man, literary or otherwise."

"I was going to carry a parcel and an umbrella."

"A what?"

I explained briefly, and Dorothea went into fits of laughter. "Oh, how lovely!" she cried. "How funny and dear of your mother! I am never spoken to, and I never carry an umbrella——"

"No, because you've always lost it," interrupted Cousin Janet. "I counted the other day, and you have lost six umbrellas in twelve months, and all with Fox's paragon frames. I never see the advertisement of the fox sitting under the umbrella in the rain without feeling depressed."

"Besides, you generally run," said Juanita, calmly. "It's difficult to speak to a running girl." She helped herself to a second supply of marmalade. "Sorry to keep you, but I cannot be hurried over my breakfast; it's my most serious meal of the day,

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and *you've* hardly eaten a thing. This zeal for hard labour strikes me as most curious." She laughed her pleasant, deep, lazy laugh and rose. "You want me to come with you?"

"Rather. I shall love it." I didn't tell her that I hoped to shine from her reflected glory and her *air*.

Mr. Tony Laxenby came into the house just as we were leaving it, and his face dropped when he saw Juanita's hat.

"I wanted to play piquet, and I have a new puzzle, bought it last night—holing golf balls."

"Sorry," said Juanita, and explained the situation. He stood open-mouthed and took out his watch.

"It's only half-past nine."

"Yes," said Juanita. "I've not been out so early for years, but Hilary is very—energetic."

"Is Dorothea going to look for work, too?"

"No, but she's going to see the Trimmers baptised later on."

He looked very depressed.

"Why not read your bacteriology?"

I quite started at the suggestion. I was so surprised Juanita must have observed it, for later on, when we were in the Tube, she said: "Tony is frightfully clever, you know, though he never lets anybody know it. He's a B.S.C. and all sorts of things. Took a double first, and bacteriology is his hobby."

"Really?" I found myself unable to say anything more. A young man with a double first playing contentedly with puzzles bereft me of speech.

We took a 'bus to 22c Regent Street to save time,

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and when we stood outside the door my breath came a little quickly. Would the literary man be alarming? Would he gaze at me as ordinary men gaze at cabbages—with a vacant, unseeing eye? Would he be like Bernard Shaw or G. K. Chesterton, with whose works I had no actual acquaintance, but whose names had reached Ridgemoor and the Garden House even as the names of Cockles and Carter—the great advertisers and purveyors of liver and antibilious pills? Juanita recalled my wandering senses. “Come,” she said, “it must be upstairs.”

I followed her up two flights, mechanically repeating the word “pills,” and admiring her pretty cinnamon-brown frock, when she stopped in front of a door marked “Private.”

“This must be it,” said she, and knocked.

“Come in,” said a voice. “Falsetto,” I thought to myself, “a literary falsetto man,” and followed Juanita into the room, with my eyes on her cinnamon train, which stimulated me in a wonderful way.

A tall, gorgeous, black-silk lady rose and confronted us. “Good-morning,” she said. “Pray, be seated.”

Juanita did so gracefully, whilst I fell on to my chair.

“What may I do for you?”

“Oh!” Juanita looked at me, but my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. “We came in answer to an advertisement in *The Telegraph*, but I think we have come to the wrong place. We expected to find a literary gentleman.”

“It is quite right,” said the gorgeous lady, suave-

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ly. "But that post has been filled up. You are wanting a situation?" She looked at me.

"Yes, please——" "ma'am" I was going to say, but checked myself in time.

"Quite so. I have plenty of vacancies. My booking fee is five shillings."

"I beg your pardon," I stammered.

"Five shillings—a very small sum, but I am obliged to make it as a safeguard."

Before I knew what I was properly doing, five shillings had left my pocket and reposed in hers.

"Now, let me see." She picked up a large ledger. "You require an engagement as mother's help, I presume?"

I doubted if I could have heard her correctly, and looked at Juanita.

"I have something here that might suit you," she continued, before I could speak. "A clergyman's family, five children, youngest eighteen months. Entire charge—wheel out. Two hours' daily teaching of elder children. Play harmonium at Sunday-school. Regular communicant. Cheerful, good-tempered. First-class references required. Treated as one of family. Salary £12 a year and laundry. You would be lucky to receive a salary if this is your first situation."

I made a queer noise in my throat, and she looked up quickly.

"Is anything the matter?"

I shook my head. "N-o. Only I hope that clergyman will go to hell and burn forever."

The lady and Juanita leapt, and the former clutched at her capacious, silk-covered heart.

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"He would deserve to," I blazed, before they could get in a word, "and I might as well explain that I am not looking for a situation as a slave in this Christian country. I am not a mother's help, thank God! I'm——" But the lady motioned Juanita to take me away, which she did with great celerity, leading me down the stairs and out into the street as she would have led a little child. Then she leant against a shop door and began to laugh. "Oh, Hilary!" she said weakly.

"Is there nowhere where we could run? Run like the wind till I feel better?" I demanded, fiercely.

"No," she said, "not in London. A policeman would be on our track. But I'll take you a 'bus drive if you like. We'll go to Kensington. Will it be too cold to go outside, I wonder."

"Cold! I'm burning with heat."

"Come along, then. We'll get one at the Circus."

Soon we were driving along Piccadilly with the cool air fanning my cheeks. Snowdrops and crocuses gleamed from the grass in the parks. The trees showed sticky, swelling buds. The pavements were thronged with slowly moving crowds, the roads with motor-cars, 'buses and hansoms. Juanita pointed out the shops and various well-known landmarks. I became interested and happy.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked at length.

"Yes," I replied. "But can such things be? Can such people really exist?"

"What people? The clergyman, or mother's helps, or agency ladies?"

"All of them," I groaned.

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"One half the world doesn't know how the other half lives."

"It's awful. Poor mother's helps!"

"And poor clergymen with their small incomes and big families."

"And *not* poor agency ladies. I don't pity them a scrap if that woman was a sample. A rank thief! She's got my five shillings."

"Yes," laughed Juanita. "I am awfully sorry, but whatever made you give it to her?"

"She was so alarming and rustling."

"She was, rather. What are you going to do next, look at shops or go home?"

"I must begin my introductions. I thought of calling on Sir Nigel Montmorency first."

"But not to-day. It is the club dance this evening, and you must keep yourself fresh for it."

"I didn't come to London to dance. I came to——"

"Rubbish!" said Juanita. "You must have a rest after your shock. Your eyes are still flashing, and your heart palpitating. No one would engage you to-day. You look more like a tragedy queen for the Adelphi than a sober secretary. Come home."

And I went.

I think I enjoyed the preparations for the dance as much as the dance itself.

At home we dressed behind closed doors. Here the Cartons carried on animated conversations—with the doors wide open—from one room to another. The whole household could watch Dorothea dive her head into her silk skirt, or see Juanita powder her

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nose. "Everybody knows I powder my nose, so why pretend I don't?" she said, examining it critically in a small hand-glass. "I don't *want* to powder it, but if it gets red at the tip, what is one to do?" She sat down in front of the mirror, enveloped in a frilly, white dressing-jacket, and leisurely began to do her hair. I liked watching the long, brown strands slip through the slim, lazy fingers. Juanita had beautiful hands; and several artists, she told me, had asked her to sit to them just for her hands and wrists. "But not for my face—they always keep that carefully out of the picture," she added, with a comical *moue*.

"It would be on account of your nose," said Dorothea, coming into the room to have her bodice fastened. "It is too like a sign-post, Nita."

"Yes," laughed Juanita, amicably. "I should be pretty but for that."

At first I was aghast at their straight remarks to one another. I had imagined that Miranda, Mick and I were fairly frank in the expression of our feelings; but had I told Mick that her nose was like a sign-post she would have treated me with marked coldness for a week. Whereas Juanita laughed in quite a pleased way.

"I will fasten you when I have finished my hair," she told her sister. And Dorothea pulled the eider-down round her shoulders and sat down on the bed, refusing my offer of help, as she said only Nita understood how to do it.

"The hooks and eyes are always a little mixed, or the draw-string round her neck won't work," volunteered Juanita while drawing her beautiful thick

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plait round her head. "Besides, she has a way of bursting into sudden fits of laughter when you are fastening her, and it's difficult to make her meet."

Dorothea chuckled and looked at Juanita with admiring eyes. "Isn't she a practical dear? Did you ever meet anyone quite so nice?"

"Not often, but I suppose she has her faults."

"She's lazy. Vilely lazy. Everyone does things for her, under the delusion that she's delicate. As she enters a house, people fly at her with cushions and footstools, and cups of beef tea—motioning her to the most comfortable chair in the room, which she placidly accepts, beaming upon everybody with her benign smile and giving little nods of approval at the general conversation. And she's no more delicate than I am. She can dance till two in the morning; go to theatres, or some other form of entertainment six days in the week, and stand for a couple of hours while a new dress is being fitted. She's just a perfect fraud."

While Dorothea was talking, Juanita was sitting in an armchair, changing her black stockings for thin, brown silk ones and a pair of bronze shoes.

"My ankles are not very good," she observed, thoughtfully. "I always hope I shan't be run over in the street, or fall into a river. I might be picked up clumsily. Thea, I am ready now. And, Hilary, I should advise you to start getting dressed. Does it take you long?"

"Not very," I said, and I went back to my own room and put my lavender frock and starched white petticoat—not a soft, embroidered muslin one, such as Juanita's—to the fire, to air and remove the

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creases, and then I sat down and wrote the following letter to mother:

"DEAR MOTHER: I had a comfortable journey yesterday, and Cousin Janet and Juanita met me at St. Pancras. Cousin Janet is very fat, and clean, and shiny, but so jolly and kind, and seems so proud of her daughters, but then I think she has reason to be, for Juanita and Dorothea are awfully nice and interesting, and say such funny things, and seem so kind to everybody. Juanita is twenty-five—Miranda's age—and Dorothea is twenty-three. Juanita is not pretty, but one never seems aware of that when you are with her; and it is only when you have left her that you remember it. And then chiefly you recall her wise sayings and original mode of speech. She looks artistic, but is eminently practical. She also never does anything, Dorothea says, but is a good organiser. Now, Dorothea works like a nigger, and is always flying round. She attended a baptism this morning—their, the Cartons', washerwoman and her whole family have turned Baptists, and Dorothea was very interested in the ceremony. Juanita went to town with me in answer to a lovely advertisement in *The Telegraph*. And it was all a fraud. A thief of a woman in a black silk dress robbed me of five shillings, and then insulted me by offering me a post as mother's help to a clergyman. I am afraid I was a little rude to her, and Juanita took me away. And we went a motor 'bus ride, which was glorious. Piccadilly is most fascinating, but it smells a bit of petrol. Everyone seems to talk quickly here, but I think the Cockney accent is almost worse than the

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Lancashire. To-night we are going to a dance at the club. Juanita and Dorothea are dressing now, so I must hurry. I hope there will be a letter from home to-morrow, and I hope you are feeling less anxious about me. Lots of girls in Bedford Park work, girls who are quite well off, the Cartons say, and it is not regarded as *infra dig.* to do so——”

A knock came at my door, and Belinda's voice asking if I were ready, and if she could do anything for me. Dorothea's voice came along the passage: “Cook's cut her finger, and I have been bandaging it up in the way we were taught at the ambulance classes, and it is bleeding harder than ever, Nita.”

“Of course. While you are following out the ambulance instructions, which you have probably forgotten, your patient is bleeding to death. You should use common sense.” And I giggled at her practicality.

They both looked nice when I joined them in the hall a few minutes later: Juanita stately in brown chiffon, with amber beads round her throat; and Dorothea, who was fair, in pale blue taffeta. Cousin Janet was gorgeous in shiny black satin, and I—well, I suddenly felt dowdy and dull, and became depressed. My gown was nearly thirty years old and had been remodelled by a village dressmaker. I drew my cloak more closely around me. “Perhaps in a crowd,” I thought . . .

“Hilary!” cried Juanita, as we removed our wraps and prinked in the cloakroom. “What a sweet, old-fashioned gown! That short waist—look, Doro-

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thea." And they all fell to staring at me with muttered notes of admiration.

"You are trying to comfort me," I stammered.

Juanita opened her eyes. "I imagined you simple and—honest, and unselfconscious——"

"And so I am," I said, hotly.

"I am trying to find an adjective to fit you," she murmured, musingly. "It isn't spritish, or elvish, or alluring, or——"

"The music has begun," said Cousin Janet.

"I know—it isn't an adjective, it's a noun. It's will-o'-the-wisp," she said, triumphantly. "You're a will-o'-the-wisp, Hilary."

"I don't think I know what you mean," I said, wondering if I ought to feel pleased.

"I should think not," said Cousin Janet, edging us towards the door, "a will-o'-the-wisp is a thing that deludes, that cheats you. You follow it, and it dances on, and you can never catch it."

"Exactly," said Juanita, delightedly. "I wonder how many dances I shall give Tony."

I danced every dance, which was no special credit to me, as there were fifteen men to the good. It was very different from the Ridgemoor functions. Everybody romped through the lancers and flirted outrageously through the waltzes. I didn't flirt, because nobody seemed to want to flirt with me. When I said so to Juanita later on, over our hair-brushing, she said: "Teddy Foster was wildly in love with you." Now, for anybody to be wildly in love with me was a new and delicious experience. I had no wish to marry, but liked to feel people would die for me, and

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my spirits rose with a bound. But when I located Teddy Foster as being a horrid, conceited man with vivid red hair, whom I had especially disliked, Juanita said I mustn't be particular.

"We could produce better in Ridgemoor," I observed.

"Perhaps. No men are very exciting. I don't think I'm particularly fond of them," she said, yawning; and when I asked her if that was her reason for dancing eight times with Mr. Laxenby, she laughed and said it was time to go to bed.

CHAPTER VIII

SOME EXPERIENCES WHILE SEARCHING FOR WORK

ON the following morning I started off early to call upon Sir Nigel Montmorency. The expected letter from home acted as a spur to a body tired after dancing and a late night.

I was informed by Dorothea that I looked peaky and anæmic, and no healthy-minded doctor would have me in his house. Juanita offered sympathy and the loan of a veil, and Cousin Janet recommended milk with my lunch, if I were not back in time to partake of theirs.

I read extracts from mother's letter by way of reply: "‘By this we hope you have been successful in obtaining suitable employment with an elderly man—as you insist upon the opposite sex—and at a good salary.’" Here I was interrupted by explosions from Dorothea, and waited till she had finished. "‘I wish bonnets were the fashion now for girls, as they were in my young days. They helped to give a staid and sedate appearance——’"

"Yes," said Cousin Janet, reminiscently, "they were very pretty, and I remember I had a white chip, and a grey Dunstable when I was your age, trimmed with white ribbon and wreaths of small flowers——"

"But they would be too attractive," interrupted Juanita. "Every man would propose to Hilary."

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Cousin Janet looked doubtful, and I continued:

"Doubtless the Cartons will be very kind to you, but do not outstay your welcome. If you have not met with a situation by the end of a week, you had better return home. Put a sovereign on one side out of the five pounds, and it will be ready for your fare——"

"Five pounds!" This from Dorothea. I nodded.

"But it is ridiculous. Have you no money, excuse my asking you, of your own?"

I held out two empty hands.

"There are our Grand Trunks!" Juanita and Dorothea spoke together, and looked at each other. Cousin Janet shuffled.

"What are Grand Trunks?"

"Some shares father left us, and whenever we are hard up we sell a bit of Grand Trunk."

"I shouldn't dream of taking it, thank you," I said, springing to my feet. "I must go off at once. It is very dear and kind of you, but there must be any amount of work in the world for people who are willing to do it, and I can always go home."

"But you don't want to do that."

"No, I don't, and certainly don't mean to."

"Take the train to Baker Street or Oxford Circus and a 'bus from there to Cavendish Square," directed Juanita, "and I will meet you for lunch at the Popular Café in Piccadilly at one o'clock."

I thanked her and took my departure, and within an hour's time stood outside the imposing, professional-looking door, with its shining brass plate, of Sir Nigel Montmorency. Suddenly my knees knocked together. What would he say to me, what would he

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think of me?—a man who had examined the throat of a crowned head and the throats of scores of notabilities from every part of the world. My own became dry and my heart beat; and for quite half a minute I stood stock-still, gazing at the plate, till a postman who came along looked at me with suspicion. Spasmodically I pressed the electric bell and nearly fell backwards down the step as the door instantaneously shot open. A tall, magnificent man looked down his nose at me, and again my knees knocked.

"Yes, miss?" He spoke through his nose, as one with adenoids, and I took heart.

"Is Sir Nigel Montmorency at home?"

"Yes, miss."

"May I see him?"

He took up a slate from the hall table. "What name, please?"

"Miss Hilary Forrest."

He ran his finger down a long list of names.

"You're not down here."

"Of course I'm not," I returned, a little snappily.

He regarded me *over* his nose this time.

"Sir Nigel only sees patients who have made appointments." His voice was crushing.

"Oh!" I said.

He unbent a little at my evident discomfiture.

"Perhaps you'd like to make one for to-morrow?"

"Yes, please."

"What time?"

"Ten o'clock."

"Sir Nigel *might* see you at that time, but he doesn't begin his professional duties till ten-thirty.

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It depends on the number of patients. We are very busy just now, though—March winds——” While he was speaking he was writing something on a card.

“Kindly present that when you come.” He bowed me off the step, and the door closed gently but firmly on my back.

A clock struck eleven as I stood and examined the card. I was not meeting Juanita for a couple of hours; there was time to call upon another couple of doctors. I took from my purse the precious cards of introduction from Doctor Greenup. Mr. Von Weisman, Upper Brook Street; Mr. Brand-Dutton, Spanish Place; Mr. Owen Westcott, Wimpole Street. My eyes lingered on the last name. I liked the sound of it. Perhaps he would be the most satisfactory and helpful of all the life-belts—this Mr. Owen Westcott. Dr. Greenup’s eyes had crinkled at the corners when he had mentioned his name. What had he said? I searched my memory. He was fat, and received two-hundred-guinea fees for operation. No, that was Sir Nigel Montmorency. Mr. Owen Westcott—I re-read the name, seeking for illumination. In a flash it came. “He was youngish, as specialists go. A clever chap; had written a most daring article in *The Lancet* about something or other, which had rocked the medical faculty in a way it doesn’t like being rocked. Had had a big struggle at the first, owing to his plain speaking, but could now rake in fees with the best of ’em.” I decided to reserve Mr. Owen Westcott till the last, as one saves the plums till the plain fare has been consumed, and, returning the cards to my purse, I set off for Upper Brook Street and Mr. Von Weisman. I had not much

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notion of its whereabouts, but a big policeman at the corner of the Square was friendly and obliging.

It was a fresh, sunny Spring morning. March sometimes makes a mistake, and amidst its biting, blustering days tucks in one so fair and radiant that we human beings, and the birds, and insects, sing for sheer joy at feeling the warm sunshine filtering through our beings. My thoughts flew to Ridgemoor and the larks singing deliciously over the valley fields, and the plovers calling on Windy Heights. Spring in a city was a new experience to me. Spring in the country and every delicious phase of it I knew as one knows a well-read and much-beloved book. On a sudden I felt as an alien in a foreign land. Here were streets, and streets, and streets. The trees in the squares were still bare. Where was a fleck of vivid green to refresh and gladden Winter-tired eyes? London fascinated me. The endless whirr and hum as of some gigantic machinery thrilled and awed me. I was content and even happy at the prospect of months lived in streets, with all the movement, and fret, and hurry of a countless multitude in my ears, and yet to-day Spring suddenly rushed into life, and, with the homing instinct of one born on the soil, I answered to her call. There were no fields, or hedges, or trees, or larks, or plovers, but there was the sun shining with all the white vividness of March, and there was the glorious blue of the sky, and the soft west wind, and I kissed my fingers to them as I pulled up abruptly in front of 10 Upper Brook Street.

The servant here was a little less awe-inspiring.

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He was rotund, with a wreathed smile lurking in all the fat creases of his face.

Yes. Mr. Von Weisman was at home. Had I an appointment? With difficulty I stuck to the truth, and said no. Never mind. Mr. Von Weisman *might* see me. He was not very busy that morning. Would I step inside?

I stepped inside and followed the man down a long passage and into a waiting-room, where I was told to take a seat and look at a paper. I requested the man to give my card of introduction to Mr. Von Weisman, and carelessly picked up *Punch*, which I stared at upside down for at least five minutes before I discovered my mistake. Then the man returned, said "This way, please, miss," and, smiling, ushered me into Mr. Von Weisman's consulting-room.

Now, I must confess that my heart beat so quickly that I could not only not see Mr. Von Weisman properly, but I couldn't reply to his good-morning. He motioned me to a chair, at least a blurred something motioned me to a chair, which I concluded was Mr. Von Weisman, and then a voice said, soothingly: "A little internal trouble, I presume?" On an instant I could see as plain as a pike-staff, so startled was I; and Mr. Von Weisman was revealed to me as a small man with a sleek, black beard and a pair of small, piercing black eyes.

"I beg your pardon," I said.

"A little internal trouble? Don't be alarmed. It's quite usual." He spoke still more soothingly.

I sat and stared at him in blank amazement.

"You are poorly. Doctor Greenup of Ridgemoor

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has been attending you, and—and thought another opinion advisable. Is not that so?"

"I was never so well in my life," I almost shouted, and Mr. Von Weisman knocked his elbow against his round chair and evidently hurt himself.

"May I ask, then"—his sleek professional manner had left him, and a nasty little German man now confronted me—"to what I am indebted for——"

"For this visit," I broke in, rapidly. "I—I will explain. I must apologise for taking up your valuable time, but I——"

"You are begging for some charitable cause?"

"Indeed I'm not," I said, indignantly. "Well, not exactly. It's difficult to explain, but——"

Mr. Von Weisman was getting tired of me, and rose.

"I want to be a secretary," I said, wildly. "I can do eighty words a minute in shorthand, and my type-writing is good—Barlock, Yost, Remington—anything you like. And I can keep books if they are not too complicated, and write a good hand, and spell, and my grammar——" Mr. Von Weisman was edging me towards the door, but I stood my ground. "And Doctor Greenup thought you might know of some medical man who might require a secretary—or you yourself——"

"*Il! A woman!*" And the next moment I was outside his door, and the hall door, and standing in Upper Brook Street, staring at the sunshine with unseeing eyes.

Presently I walked on, and my heart quieted down. Then the colour began to fade from my cheeks—I could feel it going; and in about ten minutes I be-

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gan to laugh, and I laughed so much that the people on the pavement gave me a wide berth, and cast strange and amazed looks at me.

"I hate Germans," I said to anybody who might care to listen. "And I think I hate German men more than I hate German women."

I made my way straight to Mr. Brand-Dutton, of Spanish Place. I wasn't going to be squashed and snubbed and brow-beaten by a silly little German named Von Weisman, who came over to England and sneaked in a lot of fees from credulous idiots who had more money than brains.

My voice rang with a militant note as I demanded if Mr. Brand-Dutton were at home.

"Certainly, miss. This way, miss," said the obsequious man-servant, bowing me into a waiting-room containing some gorgeous furniture and bronzes and a diminutive old gentleman in an overcoat and muffler. "Mr. Brand-Dutton is engaged just at present, miss, if you wouldn't mind waiting a little."

"I'll wait a year," I said. And the man gave a slight jump and said: "Certainly, miss."

This time I looked at *Punch* the right way up, and carefully read the advertisements in *The Daily Telegraph* and *Morning Post*. Nobody was wanting secretaries, and everybody was yearning for servants and lady helpers. "Lord Hoppington," said the man-servant, and the little old gentleman shuffled from the room. "Poor little old man," I reflected, "a belted earl most probably, with an enormous rent-roll and unlimited gout. I wouldn't change."

Presently I was summoned, and I felt no nervousness as I was shown into Mr. Brand-Dutton's con-

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sulting-room. The little German doctor had done me good.

A pleasant-faced elderly man rose and, offering me his hand, said: "Good-morning, Miss Forrest, I am glad to make the acquaintance of any friend of dear old Greenup. Knew him as a lad, and as a man at the hospitals, and a better fellow never walked."

"Never," I agreed, emphatically. "And he's just as nice now as he ever was. But before I go any further, Mr. Brand-Dutton, I must tell you Doctor Greenup hasn't sent me as a patient to you, but to ask for help."

"Oh!" he said, courteously. "Sit down, Miss Forrest. I can give you ten minutes."

I thanked him gratefully and proceeded to unfold my story. He listened with attention, even with interest it seemed to me, and when I had finished he sat in thought for a moment or two and ran his fingers through his hair.

My heart gave a little leap. Perhaps he would engage me himself, or knew of some one who required a secretary. I looked round the handsome room and at the kindly face before me, and I thought how pleasant it would be to be there. But no, Mr. Brand-Dutton didn't require a secretary. He had had one for years, and couldn't turn him away. He came for three hours each morning, and had another engagement in the afternoon. It was bread and butter to him, and the man was getting old. I understood, didn't I?

"Yes," I said.

"I would like to have engaged you very much. You are young and enthusiastic," said Mr. Brand-Dut-

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ton, "and I like young people about me. I believe you would have suited me admirably."

I thanked him, and rose to go. It was no use discussing whether I would have suited him or not, the elderly man who required bread and butter blocked the way.

"May I ask you—excuse me, won't you?—but are you obliged to work for your living?"

I shook my head.

"You have reasons, of course, and it is not my business to ask you for them, but to me it seems a pity for a young and attractive girl to be working in a great city like this, if there be no necessity for it."

"Is it a greater pity," I cried, vehemently, "than to sit down in a hole, like a cave-dweller, and do nothing, absolutely nothing, but make beds and blanc-manges?"

He regarded me with amused eyes. "Oh, that's how it is, is it? I shouldn't have thought cave-dwellers made blanc-manges, but that is beside the point. The point is, you require work, secretarial work, and I will do what I can to help you. He sat down at his desk and from a drawer took a couple of cards. "Have you any further introductions from Doctor Greenup?"

"Only two," I said, sorrowfully. "One to a Mr. Owen Westcott and the other to Sir Nigel Montmorency, and I am sure neither of them will engage me."

"I don't think Sir Nigel will, to be candid. He'll talk about gardening to you; he's mad on the subject and he'll forget all about your requirements.

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He's a great rose-grower, you know. Besides, I think he has had a man for years. Not much good coming to us old fogies. Our habits are too deeply rooted. Westcott I don't know much about, beyond the fact that he is spoken of as the coming man on nerves. A later generation than Montmorency and myself. You want to be among the doctors?"

"Not necessarily. But I couldn't get introductions to anybody else. I tried our Vicar at home, but he said I wouldn't be suited to dignitaries of the Church, bishops, and that sort of thing. My father, at one time, was acquainted with several scientific men in town, but he has lost touch with them. He is a zoölogist, and a recluse, and a breeder of chickens, so he was no good. And—I think I rather like doctors. They wouldn't be so nervy as literary people. I have been told in Bedford Park, where I am staying, that I must avoid poets as I would the devil."

Mr. Brand-Dutton smiled, scribbled something on the two cards and handed them to me. "This one, Mrs. Davy-Henderson, is the famous lady doctor, very clever and very philanthropic. She might be able to help you. The other, Dr. Graves, is an electrical man in Park Street. I hope you will be successful."

I thanked him warmly; felt inclined to tell him about the little German man, but refrained, for fear he might be a friend; shook hands and, greatly cheered, walked to the Popular Café to join Juanita for lunch.

Mr. Laxenby, or Tony, as I was soon requested to call him, had accompanied her, and was faultless-

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ly dressed, jolly, amiable. He had just purchased a puzzle from a street-hawker and was full of cheerful, anticipatory pleasure at the prospect of marshalling a wolf, a fox and a goose to some place of safety before any of them could eat the other up. He objected to lunching at the Popular Café—it was too crowded and noisy—and pioneered us to the grill-room of the Criterion. If I hadn't made the acquaintance of steak à la Criterion and bubbly potatoes I hadn't lived. He and Juanita were greatly interested in my morning's experiences, and chuckled at the horrid little German man. "Their women stay at home and act as cushions or footstools to the men, and not secretaries," observed Juanita. "You must have been a disagreeable jar to his Teutonic prejudices. And Mr. Brand-Dutton?"

"Was like a Cook's coupon—helpful and practical." I produced the two cards with swelling pride.

"I should have been kicked out by everybody," said Tony, gloomily. "And I a better man than you, Miss Hilary. Of course, it's that grey frock and nobby hat." I enquired what my clothes had to do with my reception. That I expected to be engaged upon my merits only, and for no other reason whatever. And I reflected what a great similarity there was in people's views.

"The sex question will always creep in," he said.

"Yes," agreed Juanita, "it is inevitable. A pretty girl will always have a better chance than an ugly."

"And a clever girl than either?" I asked. Juanita and Tony were not sure. "You'll get m——" Juanita began, but I forestalled her with a groan. "Oh, don't," I pleaded, wearily. "You're so different from

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other people, and now you are going to be commonplace, like the rest. It's dreadful. Is there no person in the world who will believe a girl genuinely wants to work, to fill her life with some suitable and absorbing occupation, and not get married? Is marriage the alpha and omega of a woman's existence? Are men so attractive and is the married state so blissful? Cast your eye round upon the men you have met—the young ones are conceited and didactic and superior, and the old ones are podgy and rheumy and dull. No thought beyond their dinners and smokes and whiskies and beds. Why, women are twice as attractive and interesting as men. A woman will have you all a-quiver with excitement at the hang and cut of her new gown, while a man bores you to extinction with his dull, stupid trousers and prosy dissertations on protection *versus* free trade."

Juanita and Tony had stopped eating their lunch and were regarding me with interest and astonishment.

"I beg your pardon," said Juanita, humbly, "I had no idea marriage was such a distasteful subject to you."

"And may I ask, simply from a spirit of intense interest and not curiosity, why you are seeking work with a man and not with a fascinating woman?" asked Tony.

"I'm not going to marry the men for whom I work," I snapped, and Tony went on with his lunch, softly whistling between each mouthful.

"I am afraid I must go," I said, rising. "I want to call on Mr. Westcott, and I want to use Mr. Brand-Dutton's introductions at once."

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"I don't think anyone will see you in an afternoon," said Juanita. "Doctors usually only see patients in a morning, and go to the hospitals and on their rounds in an afternoon." I chafed with impatience.

"What's the hurry, Hilary? You are not dependent for your bread on meeting with a situation at once."

"No, but my reputation is at stake. I vowed I would be settled within a fortnight. And the days are racing by. To-morrow is Saturday—a bad day, I understand, for seeing doctors. Then there is Sunday. And, supposing I am not fixed up in the fortnight, what shall I do, Juanita?"

"You will remain on with us. It's quite simple, Hilary dear."

I shook my head.

"Yes, you will."

"Mother said I mustn't outstay my welcome."

"You only quote your mother when it suits your convenience," said Juanita, calmly.

"I shall go to a boarding-house."

"Impossible without a chaperon."

"Life is full of limitations," I sighed. "Oh, that I were a man!"

"I thought you hated men," remarked Tony, calling for coffee and cigarettes.

"I don't recollect saying such a thing."

"You mentioned that they were conceited, and superior, and podgy, and boring, and rheumatically." He ticked the adjectives off with his fingers.

"Perhaps I exaggerated. I was a little cross, you know, at Juanita's suggestion."

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"A little cross! A violent passion, I call it," he said, laughing. "Besides, girls *have* been known to get married. I mean nice girls. Why is the thought of marriage so distasteful to you?" He glanced at Juanita as he spoke.

"I haven't thought much about it. In the country we don't see any men to marry. And mother is saving for our 'future.' That's how she puts it. So, of course, we have settled down to thinking we shall always be single. She also talks of annuities and things like that—and how we must all live together when she and father are gone—and that if we are careful now with the silver plate it will last us our lifetimes. And she is frightfully angry if the servants wash the spoons and forks together, because the forks scratch the spoons."

"Oh!" said Tony. "So all this has put you off marriage?"

"That and a few other things. I don't like to think that if I had a husband he some day might speak of me as 'the wife.' If there is any expression I loath it is 'the wife.'"

"Of course that would be a serious deterrent to married happiness," said Tony, gravely. "Is there anything else you can mention which might help a man to avoid mistakes?"

"No," I returned. "I have nothing more to say on the subject. The girl you marry will be able to do that." And Juanita upset some salt, and went red.

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CHAPTER IX

AMONG THE DOCTORS WHO PROFFER THEIR ADVICE

I WAS at Sir Nigel Montmorency's on the stroke of ten, after breakfasting in solitude. The Cartons apologised for this, but made no attempt to get up. They said that the old adage, "The early bird catches the worm," had led many people to disaster; that human beings were not at their best at an early hour; that had I waited to interview Sir Nigel at eleven he would have been full of quips and cranks and wreathed smiles, whereas at ten he would be cross and grumpy. And I replied that I had no desire for quips and cranks and other nonsense; that what I wanted was a secretaryship; and if Sir Nigel began any quipping, I should at once bring him back to business.

"I don't know how you can manage to be so strenuous at this hour of the morning," said Juanita, laying her dusky head against her pillow. "I feel like a tired yellow hen."

I laughed as I kissed her, and told her that I would cease to be strenuous when I had met with an engagement; that I should enjoy nothing better than to "play round" with her and Dorothea for a week, and I would if Sir Nigel engaged me as his secretary at a big salary.

"Let's hope he will," she said as I left the room,

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"and we'll have a succession of theatres," she called after me.

"What pleasure-loving people!" I thought as I walked down the stairs, "and how charming their gaiety makes them——"

"Good luck!" shouted Dorothea—who was attired in a gorgeous kimono dressing-down—over the banisters.

"And how charming their gaiety makes them!" I continued, as I walked across the green to the station. "It is much easier to be good when living with people who laugh, than with those who always notice when the wind is in the east."

And I had no luck with Sir Nigel—not a spark. The last thought that ever seemed to enter his bushy head was to engage me as his private secretary.

When I politely mentioned, on being conducted to his room by the man with adenoids, that I was not a patient, and had come on business, he laughed a big, hearty laugh and asked me what I meant by getting him out of bed at that hour.

This is what Juanita had predicted, and I was covered with confusion. "It's not *very* early," I stammered. "I'm sorry."

"Never mind," he said, cheerfully. "I always begin work at half-past ten, so half an hour extra won't kill me. What's the business?"

And rapidly I told him, making my story as concise as possible. These big men mustn't be wearied with unnecessary details. But even then his thoughts seemed to wander. He stroked his head, which was bushy and red; pushed up his glasses, and finally

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blew his nose so loudly and long that abruptly I paused.

"Chuck it," he then said, and I rose. "No, I don't mean that." And he pushed my indignant body back into my chair. "I mean, abandon the idea of secretarial work and take up gardening. There are any amount of secretaries—good, bad, and indifferent—in the world, but very few practical gardeners."

"But——"

"I know all about that," and he waved me to silence. "You are going to say that gardening doesn't pay. But it does if carried out on thoroughly practical, scientific lines. So does poultry—but not in the way it is practised in this country. Suicidal packing a hundred fowls together in one small run and then expecting good results. Suicidal, I say." He pointed a condemnatory forefinger at me.

"But——" I began again.

"The remedy is easy. Put fewer together. Change their runs once a week. Give them fresh ground to explore and scratch, and you'll get good layers and healthy chicks, and ten per cent. on your money. Then there's gardening. My daughters and I have been instrumental in starting an horticultural college for women. Something must be done with superfluous woman, and there's money in gardening. Take, for an example, the lack of a patent strawberry picker. Think of Kent. The first man or woman who invents a practical, workable strawberry picker has made his fortune."

"But," I shouted, trying to get in a word edge-ways, "I haven't any inventive gift." And he said it was a pity, a great pity. A fortune waiting to

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be picked up, and in return for it nothing but an implement with a long, wooden handle to save the back-breaking work of stooping; a handle with a simple contrivance at the end to nip off the strawberry and shoot it into a basket.

"And where would the basket be?" I asked, becoming interested. And he said it would be amongst the strawberries, of course.

"But why don't *you* invent it, as you seem to know all about it?" I said, gently. And he stopped talking and looked at me over the top of his glasses; and I knew that any chance of his engaging me as his secretary was gone at that moment, and I gave a little sigh.

And at the sigh he relented, or else he wanted to talk a little more.

"There's bee-keeping," he suggested, in a voice of one trying to meet an obstinate person half way. "Bee-keeping brought up to date, with bar-frames and supers and section boxes." And again I intimated that I took no interest in gardening or poultry or bee-keeping. And once more he said it was a pity.

"I don't see it," I replied, getting up. "You must do the work you feel fitted for——"

"But gardening is so healthy," persisted this obstinate, provoking man. And I said "good-morning," and thanked him for sparing me so much of his valuable time.

"Sorry I can't help you, but secretaries are not in my line. Now, if you had been a gardener——" And I hurried to the door.

"Good-morning," I said again; "and you will ex-

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cuse me, but doesn't it seem a waste of time, Sir Nigel, to be gazing down tiresome people's throats when you might be making a colossal fortune out of bees, or poultry, or strawberry pickers?" And I vanished.

I made my way straight to Doctor Graves, of Park Street. Sir Nigel had shaken but not broken me. I absolutely refused to invent a patent strawberry picker, and I insisted upon being a secretary. Doctor Graves was courteous and non-committal. *He* didn't want a secretary, and he didn't know of anybody who did. I thanked him, and walked to Mrs. Davy-Henderson in Portman Square. I was beginning to know the west end of London as intimately as I knew Ridgemoor. I had heard a great deal in Mrs. Davy-Henderson's favour from the Cartons. She was philanthropic, broad-minded, eclectic. I didn't know anything about the last, but the philanthropy sounded useful. She was at home, I was informed by the maid, in answer to my enquiry, also Miss Pollie. I forbore to mention that I was not acquainted with Miss Pollie, and was shown into a large drawing-room full of beautiful furniture and flowers and light—vivid March light—and singing birds. A tall mirror reflected my image and suggested to me that if a shoe-lace were tied and a flying strand of hair tucked away I might be more attractive to the feminine eye.

A stout lady entered the room with a rush and outstretched hands. "Dear, I am so glad to see you. Any friend of Pollie is welcome." And she promptly kissed me on both cheeks.

Hastily I explained that I was no friend of Pol-

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lie; and that I had come with an introduction from Mr. Brand-Dutton.

"Oh!" she said, the smile disappearing from her face, and a professional manner settling upon her like a cloud. "You wish to consult me about your health? Something that you couldn't mention to your medical man?"

Did all these people imagine me suffering from internal tumour or something equally indescribable? When I explained my business, she murmured "Oh!" in a tone that was not encouraging.

"Mr. Brand-Dutton mentioned that you were interested in women's work," I said, ingratiatingly.

She did not reply.

"My shorthand is good," I said, clutching at my oozing courage, "and my Barlock—I mean my type-writing is better."

"Is this your first situation, or rather your first search for a situation?"

"Yes, but I am very energetic and painstaking."

"Are you obliged to work for your living?"

"No." (Why did everybody ask me that?)

"Is your home in London?"

"No, in the country."

"And your parents are able to support you?"

"Yes, but——"

"My advice is, go home. London is no fit place for a young girl of your class to be alone. Wait"—she held up her hand. "You are going to tell me that you *must* work. That there are grave reasons: an unkind stepmother, a quarrelsome sister, a cramping, stifling environment. I have heard all that before. You may even have a better reason for wish-

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ing to leave home. But whatever it is I should not think it sufficiently good to induce me to give you my help. I'd sooner see my child dead than working on her own in London."

"And yet you—you have worked," I said, slowly. "Probably you began as a young woman."

She started. "There were reasons——"

"And I have reasons."

"I was plain."

"God above!" I cried. "I used to long to be lovely—lovely, like sister Miranda—but now I almost wish I was marked with smallpox."

"Hush!" she said, imperatively. "Do not say anything so wicked. Besides, do not worry. You will lose your looks the same as every other woman. You have only to wait. That is a plain woman's consolation. Nearly every woman becomes plain sooner or later."

"And have you minded not being——"

"Pretty. Not of late years; I have been too busy, too absorbed in my work. I minded as a girl—every normal woman minds. Good-bye. I hope you don't think I have been unsympathetic. I have your and every other girl's welfare at heart. You smile. Some day you may realise that I was right. The greatest blessings that any human being can enjoy are a good home, a good father and a good mother."

"It looks as though it were going to be a case of boot-laces," I mused, as I left the house. Boot-laces and a good pitch in the Strand, and then, ten to one, a policeman would tell me to go home. There was only Mr. Owen Westcott left. My last life-belt, and if he, too, failed me I should be submerged

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in the deep waters of failure. I should go home and continue to make blanc-manges and beds, if the Strand were forbidden me. Never! I went down Wimpole Street at a run, and when I reached Mr. Westcott's door I stood and hesitated, reading his name on the brass plate and staring at the curtained windows. Mr. Owen Westcott—I liked the name. What sort of a man was the owner of it? Would he be like the horrid little German, or the horticultural Sir Nigel, or the slow, kindly Mr. Brand-Dutton? And as I hesitated the door opened and a big man with a grave, tired face and grave eyes came out and, on seeing me, hesitated. For a moment he gave me a searching look, not curious but interested, and then, as I did not speak, lifted his hat and stepped into a carriage that was waiting, and drove away.

I knew it was Mr. Westcott, but I rang the bell.

"Was that Mr. Westcott who drove away?"

"Yes, miss."

"When will he be back?"

"On Monday at ten-thirty."

"I wish to make an appointment, please, for that morning at eleven o'clock."

"Mr. Westcott is very busy all that day. Could you say Tuesday?"

"But Tuesday is such a long time off," I said, disappointed.

"Only two and a half days, miss," and the man coughed.

To my annoyance I felt myself go crimson, and for no reason whatever. "Very well, Tuesday at eleven o'clock."

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"What name, miss?"

I told him and returned to Bedford Park hungry and somewhat depressed.

They all screamed with laughter about Sir Nigel, were sympathetic about Mrs. Davy-Henderson, though Cousin Janet was doubtful as to whether she wasn't right, and cheered and comforted and fed me. Tony wondered how it came about that I received any politeness at all. I looked at him, and he quickly explained that he wasn't implying that the politeness was undeserved, but that if he had called on doctors, calmly making appointments with them and leading them to suppose he was a hundred guinea patient and had then declared his true business, he would have been booted out of the various front doors—and he a real jewel!

"I am a jewel, too," I observed. And he suggested, without wishing to underrate my attractions, that it wasn't because I was a jewel, but because I was a girl that I gained a hearing.

I mentioned that this everlasting dragging in of the sex question suggested to me that he might be amusing, but was not original. And he spluttered at this and recalled to my memory the fact that the only snub I had received, from my own telling, was from a woman; so the question was proved.

"There was the German," I flashed. And he shrugged his shoulders, and said *he* didn't count and would I play a game of bezique if I could condescend to bring myself down to his level for the space of an hour or two. And we played on a little table pushed in the sunny window of the drawing-room, whilst Juanita lazily looked on and pretended to

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sew, and Dorothea engaged or endeavoured to engage Cousin Janet in a discussion as to whether the kindergarten system of teaching children was a good or a bad one. And altogether I spent a very pleasant and restful afternoon.

CHAPTER X

I CALL UPON MR. OWEN WESTCOTT

I WOULD like to linger here and say a few words about a Sunday at Warraby—one of the pleasantest days of the week; when, after church in the morning, and dinner, the Cartons threw open their house and all the dull, bored young men of Bedford Park and all the lonely unattached women and girls assembled therein to drink tea, and joke, and talk; and so for two or three hours forgot their worries and boredom while basking in Cousin Janet's smiles and hospitality, and listening to Juanita's wise sayings, and laughing at Dorothea's unusual and original conversation.

Some of the more favoured ones remained on for supper. And what a supper it was! No maids—Cousin Janet said they required a rest on Sunday as much as anybody else—so the supper was laid early, and away went cook, Belinda and the little maid to “walk out” with their respective young men; and Tony carried in the hot potatoes and beer; and Dorothea cut the bread; and Juanita produced more knives and forks if the party had swelled to any dimension; and Cousin Janet, assisted by Tony, carved large, thin slices of juicy sirloin of beef. How gay they all were, how happy! And how much pleasanter than church twice a day and Sunday-

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school sandwiched in between! "You are a pagan, Hilary," said Juanita, "and I suppose *we* are." And yet one knew instinctively that they were good, generous, and tender-hearted and charitable. The young men and women were happy. The lines were smoothed out of their faces. There was plenty of clever, interesting talk—books, plays, places discussed brightly and shrewdly. But there was no gossip. No ill-natured discussion of neighbours. No scandal. And no side or superiority.

"People who are important and stuck up," said Juanita, "have invariably some weakness to hide—either lack of birth, breeding or brains. They vaguely realise that they have missed a something which might have impressed their fellow-creatures; they dare not stand on their own basis, so they put on side to carry off a situation. And sidy people are nearly always women. A sidy man is scarcely tolerated by his own sex. People who are really great, who have an unassailable position, who have big minds and hearts and brains, are always simple. Their very unselfconsciousness proves them to be above the ruck of ordinary mortals. A true gentleman or gentlewoman could never be a snob."

"And do you mean that everybody ought to know everybody?" And I thought of Mrs. Pratt's teachings.

"Oh, dear me, no!" She looked surprised at my question. "People are of such dissimilar tastes and habits. And it is naturally against the grain for cultured, educated people to associate with uneducated. But if they should happen to be thrown amongst uncongenial people they should, at least,

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be polite. I have known women to be so insolent to other women that had they been men they would have been kicked. And yet we are called the gentler sex. I like women; in many respects they are superior to men; but, for true refinement of feeling, for innate courtesy, give me a man. And men, too, rarely toady to wealth. And I really think the very worst form of vulgarity is the worship of money. Money is a useful commodity and a very pleasant one, but—our Lord and His disciples were poor men, and were they not gentlemen?”

I looked at Juanita when she had finished speaking. Behind that lazy, smiling, gentle personality was an enormous amount of quiet strength. She not only had an “air,” I told myself, but a character. Tony Laxenby would be a lucky——

“Of what are you thinking so earnestly?” demanded that gentleman at my elbow. “Of your doctors?”

“No, of Juanita.”

“It is difficult *not* to think of Juanita,” he said, somewhat suavely. “Will you come to the dining-room and play ‘Up, Jenkins’? We always play it on Sunday nights in winter. It keeps you warm.”

“Oh, does it?” I said, my thoughts flying to Ridgemoor, and the family reading Sunday literature.

“Yes. Come along. I’m captain of our side. And you come down on the table with your hands open. Some people *will* shut them, and it’s so stupid.”

We played “Up, Jenkins” till Dorothea’s hairpins lay about the floor like chaff, and my fingers were red and smarting. But I went to bed that night

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greatly refreshed and invigorated. The day's play had done me good.

Monday I spent in writing letters, answering advertisements likely and unlikely; informing mother that I should *not* take a situation as mother's help if all else failed; assuring Miranda that, much as I liked Juanita and Dorothea, she would always come first in my affections; and in walking to Kew Gardens with Dorothea and Juanita.

"Don't ask me," the latter said, "who made Kew Gardens, when they were made, to whom they belong and who pays for their up-keep. For I don't know—I never can answer questions like that—and I don't want to know."

"I know," said Dorothea. "They originated in the exotic garden formed by a Lord Capel. And they were greatly extended by George the Third, and the widow of Frederick, Prince of——"

"Oh don't, Thea," entreated Juanita. "You'll give me a headache. We just want to enjoy the grounds and the peaceful trees and the quiet grass. There will be bluebells by-and-by, Hilary—carpets of them. You will be able to come and steep your soul in their azure loveliness, and forget your doctor and typewriter and work."

"If I ever possess them," I thought, with a sigh. I was dispirited, and Juanita, observing the sigh, took my arm and bade me cheer up.

"Did you expect to meet with a situation at once?" she asked.

"Y-es."

"Men are out of work for six months, and even

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longer, and then become sandwiches," volunteered Dorothea. "I don't wish to depress you——" She went off at a sudden spurt, and I couldn't catch the rest.

"I'll tell you what," said Juanita. "You must wear a different frock to-morrow, Hilary. That grey is pretty, but doesn't suit you."

"I won't," I cried, indignantly. "I will *not* be engaged on the strength of my clothes."

"Don't be silly and obstinate," she said, calmly. "You won't be engaged for your clothes, but with them."

"It's the same thing."

"No, it isn't. It's quite different. I saw a pretty, green frock in your wardrobe."

"Last year's."

"It's pretty, all the same. Springy and fresh."

"I've no wish to look Springy. I want to be sedate."

"Well, you can't; unless you keep your eyes shut."

I shut my mouth with a snap and refused to argue.

But I wore the green frock. Juanita fastened the bodice, and admired my old hat, and at eleven o'clock I presented my card at Mr. Owen Westcott's in Wimpole Street, and found myself seated in the waiting-room with six other people. Mr. Westcott was not a coming man; he had eventually come. We all studied variously the daily papers, *The Illustrated London News*, *The Sketch*, *The Queen*, and a North-western Railway guide; and between scrutinising pictures I took covert peeps at the six people, and

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dropped my eyes when I found they were doing the same thing to me.

There were two men and four women. All, with one exception, looked nervous and highly strung. Neurotic, I suppose I should say. Restless, irritable, nervy people with worried faces and trembling hands. The exception was a woman beautifully dressed, with a calm, sweet face and composed, dignified manner. She looked about forty-five, and her grey hair was taken off her forehead in French fashion, and she looked indeed like an old picture of a French marquise. Suddenly I felt shabby and insignificant. My whole rig-out could have been purchased for a five-pound note, and this stately lady's furs were priceless. Would Mr. Westcott take the faintest interest in anyone belonging so palpably to the middle class as I? My cheeks flushed at the bare thought of his patronage or indifference.

One of the men was summoned by the servant, and a little, fluttering sigh escaped from the patients who were left behind. When would their turn come? And what would the great man say? Were they incurables? Or would change, rest, massage, electricity restore them to health and happiness?

Only my French marquise remained unruffled, unmoved. She had learnt how to wait.

Suddenly she smiled at me and, crossing the room, sat down beside me. "You will pardon me," she said, "but—I want to know. I am curious; you look so young and strong and virile there *can* be nothing the matter with you. You are not a patient? You are not ill?"

"No," I returned. "There is nothing the matter

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with me, thank you. You are very kind." I was so pleased and gratified at her speaking to me that I smiled into her face like a baby.

"I am suffering from neuritis in my right arm. The pain is very severe at times; it is almost unbearable. That is why I am here."

"And yet you are so calm. The others are all restless. But the great ladies went to the guillotine smiling."

"Thank you," she said, putting her hand for a moment on mine. "And you?"

"Oh, I am never calm. I wish I could be. I like dignified people."

"Perhaps—when you are older"—she smiled—"and—you know Mr. Westcott?"

I shook my head. "No. I have an introduction to him. I am looking for a secretaryship, and I am hoping he will be able to help me. What is he like? Do you know him?"

"I have known him since he was a boy. And what is he like? I have never thought. To me he is just Owen Westcott. Strong, human—human in his strength as well as his weakness. A man, above all things, and one to whom I would go in sorrow. He will be kind to you."

"Lady Waterson!" And my beautiful French marquise smiled good-bye to me and quietly left the room.

Others came and went. The time passed on feet of lead, and I was almost beginning to wonder if I were developing nerves, so fidgetty and grumpy did I become, when I heard my name "Miss Forrest!" With a sigh of relief I followed the man down the

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long, dimly lit hall and into Mr. Westcott's room. A bright shaft of sunlight from a side window struck me as I entered, and for a moment I paused, dazzled and unable to see. Then somebody lowered a blind, and a voice said: "Good-morning, Miss Forrest, will you sit down?" The voice was nice, and quiet, and friendly; and, relieved, I raised my eyes to encounter a searching and somewhat amused scrutiny from the man in front of me. His face was grave and still tired, yet there was that flicker of amusement lurking in the corners of his eyes and mouth, and at sight of it I took heart. With such a voice and such a look Mr. Owen Westcott must be sympathetic.

"You know, I am not a patient," I began.

"No, I thought not. You don't look like one."

I paused, trying to find suitable words to tell my story. None of the other doctors had been impressed. My statements and request for help had been so bald and practical; perhaps if I could say I was without a penny in the world, or was an orphan, or had a mother dying from consumption. Mr. Westcott was regarding me patiently and enquiringly. Still I racked my brains. So much depended upon the way a thing was put. An orator knew how and where to touch the people—a word, a smile, a thunder of rhetoric. Feverishly I twisted my handkerchief into a ball and shuffled my feet. I glanced helplessly at Mr. Westcott and suddenly he laughed, and I laughed with him.

"Oh, thank you," I cried. "Now I shall be able to speak. It doesn't feel quite so like church. It was Doctor Greenup, of Ridgemoor, who spoke of you to me, so I am not quite so like a Salvation Army

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girl begging for money, or an agent touting for sewing machines or gold watches, as I must appear. An introduction is some excuse for calling, isn't it? And I had to choose a business hour, because I was so afraid you mightn't see me if I stated what I wanted. So I just had to pretend I was a patient; it was deceitful, but I hope you will forgive me. You see, you are my last life-belt——" And I broke off in wild confusion at his look of astonishment.

"What I mean by life-belt—it was my Cousin Dorothea who called you all life-belts—is, that you are my last introduction. I have been to Sir Nigel Montmorency, Mr. Brand-Dutton, Mrs. Davy-Henderson, Dr. Graves, Mr. Von Weisman and an agency lady, and I am still without work. And I hoped you might be able to help me to a situation, even if you don't want one yourself," I finished, completely mixed up.

"Don't want what?" he enquired, looking helpless.

"A secretaryship. I forgot to mention that. It is a secretaryship I am looking for. I want to be a secretary to some one, to any one. I don't care to whom. I *must* find a post by the end of the week. I vowed to them all—to mother, to grandmother—I would be fixed up in less than a fortnight. And they laughed at me—grandmother even scoffed. And ten days are gone, they have flown; I must leave Bedford Park at the end of the week, and I am still without a job. The agency lady wanted me to be a mother's help to Christian clergymen for twelve pounds a year. Wash them, wheel them out——"

"Wash Christian clergymen?"

"I mean their babies. And, of course, I won't. I

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am only fitted for a secretaryship. I can write short-hand, and type, and keep books. I kept the penny savings bank's account at home most accurately, father said. But, of course, being a zoölogist, he doesn't know much about those things. Still I never cooked them, and I think my handwriting is good. And I shan't require a big salary at first. I think I could manage on twenty-five or thirty shillings a week. And—I think that is all.”

“Oh, is that all?” he said, gravely.

I nodded, my heart beating high with hope as, with his head sunk a little forward, he fell into thought. Was he going to engage me for himself? It would be almost too good, too lucky. I liked Mr. Owen Westcott from the very first moment he came out of the front door of his house and stepped into his carriage. I liked him tremendously. He was so quiet, and grave, and strong. He was not tall, but the depth of his chest was great, and his shoulders extraordinarily broad. And I liked his thin, grave, tired face and his smooth hair parted down the middle. And why, I reflected, did all the men in Ridgemoor wear moustaches? A clean-shaven face was surely stronger and more distinguished. Certainly there were under-shot and over-shot men, and men with loose india-rubber mouths, and men with hard, cruel ones; still if your mouth was straight and firm—I glanced at Mr. Westcott, but he was still thinking.

“Oh,” I cried, of a sudden, “do think aloud. It is so difficult to sit still when you may be having all sorts of lovely situations in your mind. Do you know of anything?”

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"No," he said, and his voice was so gentle, and the look he gave me was so sympathetic and kind, that I had much ado to keep myself from springing to my feet and squeezing his hands. He was not young and he was married—certain to be, because unmarried doctors didn't get on. "No, I am sorry; but, at the moment, I do not know of anything suitable. You will excuse my asking you, you will not take *anything*? You will not go into the city as a clerk?"

"I don't want to. Not if I can get anything else."

He looked relieved. "City girls, I am afraid, have a pretty rough time of it. They are knocked about, they scramble and fight for the 'buses, just like strong men. And—I am afraid they lose their softness and freshness."

"But if girls work for their living, they must. They must stand up for themselves, for men won't do it for them, and there is no reason why they should."

"No, perhaps not. But need girls shout, and bustle, and smoke; and wear short skirts and enormous puffed-out hair, and hats at the back of their heads?" He raised his eyebrows whimsically.

"They needn't. I shan't."

He smiled. And when I came to reflect upon Mr. Owen Westcott's smile, I knew it was no ordinary one. It came slowly, as though it were difficult; and it crept into the corners of his eyes before it reached his mouth; and when it went it went suddenly, just like a light put out by an extinguisher.

"And you want to work for a doctor?"

"I shouldn't mind a prime minister, but they are

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limited, and Doctor Greenup suggested the medical profession. He said nearly all the big men were keeping secretaries, and that, in most cases, a woman would be good enough."

"Oh, is that the way he put it? Not very polite."

"He is an old friend. And I went to him as soon as I decided to leave home. I am not obliged to work for my living, but please do not cease to be interested on that account. I have a good home and good plain food, and fires and eider-downs—mother always mentions those—but my reason for wishing to leave was just as important as having no food, and parents, and eider-downs. And grandmother helped me—I am not a bit fond of her, really—but she was decent for once. And father swore. As a rule, mother bosses everything—but this time father said—well, you can imagine what he said—something—'Hilary shall go.' We were very shocked, and mother wept a little, and then she gave me five pounds and the oldest tin trunks, and here I am."

"And what do you mean about leaving Bedford Park?"

"I am staying with relations," I said, delighted with his interest. "My second cousins, but mother says I mustn't outstay my welcome, and must only remain a fortnight. So—if I have not met with anything by the end of the week—I am going to sell boot-laces in the Strand. I simply *cannot* go home. Could you?"

"No, I don't think I could. It would be very ignominious." Again the slow smile. "And you have been to several doctors?"

"Yes; one threw me out of the front door, and

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cried: 'Gott in himmel—a voman!' It wouldn't be wise to mention names, would it? Another besought me to chuck—that was his expression—secretarial work, and invent a patent strawberry picker and keep bees and poultry."

Mr. Owen Westcott went off into sudden laughter. And his laugh was as peculiar as his smile—just as though it hurt him, and it ended as abruptly.

"You won't suggest that I shall be anything else. It is so difficult to change all in a minute."

"Not for the world. I think it would be a pity, a thousand pities, to change so much as a hair's breadth of your personality." He spoke with such force that I was startled. "And now"—he drew an inkstand towards him and picked up a pen—"I will do what little I can to help you. We don't all keep secretaries. I don't. I haven't sufficient work. But I know of a man who might possibly be able to help you. He is a Doctor Peignton, of Grosvenor Square. A most able man, but who through indifferent health was obliged to abandon the medical profession—at the age of forty-five went in for dentistry. He now has one of the largest practices in London and is considered our best mechanical man. He is extremely busy, and, up to a few weeks ago, a daughter acted as his amanuensis. I saw her marriage in the paper just lately. And what arrangements Doctor Peignton has made towards filling her place I don't know. But I think it might be quite worth your while to call upon him."

"Oh, thank you," I said, "I am most grateful. I am getting just like a snowball. Everybody gives me an introduction to somebody else. Surely I shall

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meet with something in time. But it's the waiting; that's the rub."

"Yes, it's the waiting. Many would weather a storm if they could afford to wait. But surely you can. Your relations are not tired of you?" He sounded almost anxious, and I was very grateful to him.

"No, indeed. They are awfully kind. But it's mother. She is so afraid I shall tire them."

"Tire them!" He gave a half sigh. Then, picking up the pen again, he said: "What—name did you say?"

"Hilary Forrest."

"But why Hilary? I was under the impression it was a man's name and connect it with some saint or religious festival."

"Yes, but it means cheerful; from hilarious. And father says I was such an excessively cheerful baby that the name seemed appropriate. Mother wanted Martha."

"I don't think Martha would have suited you." And he laughed his strange painful laugh, while he handed me the card of introduction.

"I am afraid I have taken up a great deal of your time," I apologised. "And crowds of people are waiting to see you. Thank you very, very much, Mr. Westcott. How shall I express my gratitude?"

"Come and tell me when you have a berth."

"Indeed I will," I said. "Good-bye. And please forgive me for talking so much. You are such a sympathetic listener that I couldn't help it."

"Good-bye, Miss Hilary. And—thank you for bringing in a bit of the Spring sunshine"—he held

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the door open for me—"and good luck, Miss ary." And I knew that he watched me walk length of the long hall, and through the door, out into the street. Did he watch all his patient wondered? And for some strange unexplain reason I hoped he didn't.

CHAPTER XI

I MEET WITH A SECRETARYSHIP

THE following morning I found lying by my plate a letter addressed to me in a strange handwriting. The envelope was delicately tinted and faintly scented. The scent was familiar. Where had I met it? It was just lately, and yet I couldn't locate it. I sniffed and sniffed, turning the envelope over in my hand.

"I should open it," suggested Dorothea, "it may contain something interesting." And it did.

The letter was from Lady Waterson:

"The Old House,
"The Terrace,
"Richmond.

"DEAR MISS FORREST: My interest in your story of yesterday is my excuse for writing to you. I obtained your address from Mr. Westcott by telegram. If you have not already succeeded in meeting with an engagement, I might suggest your calling upon Mr. Head, of *The Last Word*. He is an old friend of mine, and I enclose you my card of introduction. Of course, you know Mr. Head's famous periodical. He is an able man, in spite of being a crank, and if he has any work I am sure he will give it to you. His special craze at the moment

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is the treatment of cancer *without* operation. Should you decide to call upon him you might read up the subject—he had five columns in the January number of *The Last Word*—the merest smattering will suffice, as he will do all the talking. Simply look intelligent and keep away from the word ‘knife.’ Should he take a fancy to you, and has any kind of an opening on his paper, I believe he’d take you on. He is a thoroughly kind as well as a thoroughly genuine man. He will be in a desperate hurry, being of the type of crank who wants to revolutionise the world in half an hour. But don’t get discouraged or flurried. Keep calm and make tactful little references to Baron Franzipanni, the founder of the cure.

“I shall be so delighted if you will come and see me. My husband and I are always at home on Sunday afternoons.

“With every good wish for your success.

Believe me, yours most truly,

“MARIE WATERSON.”

Cousin Janet, Dorothea and Juanita were overcome with surprise at this communication.

“It’s extraordinary the way some people take fancies to strangers,” observed Cousin Janet, and wondered why her two daughters were so much amused at her remark.

“It’s lucky Doctor Peignton couldn’t see you till to-day; he might have engaged you, and you would have missed this delightful Mr. Head. I know all about him. He once went to prison for some quixotic reason or other. And he hates the poor Sultan of

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Turkey; says very unkind things about him; and is very sorry for all poor down-trodden creatures. You have only to be a worm, with somebody's foot upon you, and Mr. Head will write reams about it and go on writing till the person removes his foot. He is a very persistent, painstaking man; and all the editors of unsuccessful journals are jealous of him, and depict him as a man with a large swollen head, tilting against a hard brick wall."

I looked at Dorothea admiringly. She was so up in everything and everybody. Where did she gain all her knowledge? She was always so busy she never seemed to have much time to read. If she skimmed through a paper it was a week old. And she enjoyed bill posters equally with the poet O'Flates, the great Irish exponent. She would read Swinburne while catching a train, and glance through Rossetti while waiting for her soup to cool. And yet she always *knew*. Juanita's reading was conducted on different lines. She liked a couch or window seat upon which she could stretch her full, lazy length. She liked three cushions and a paper-cutter, and she liked to be left alone till she had finished. It was not a scrap of use Dorothea's endeavouring to inveigle her into an argument as to the merits or otherwise of conscription while she was engaged upon *The Morals of Marcus*; conscription could wait, and Marcus couldn't.

"I might come with you to-day," volunteered Dorothea. "I have to buy some new boots, and I should like to poke about the offices of *The Last Word*. We take the journal at the club; and *you* might go and study the back numbers on cancer

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while I put some flowers in my hat. My felt's looking unseasonable. I'll meet you at the station at eleven o'clock."

"What flowers are you going to put?" enquired Juanita, anxiously.

"The marigolds."

"But you can't put marigolds in a red——"

I left them to it, and made my way to the club, spending a profitable hour with *The Last Word*.

Of course Dorothea wasn't at the station at eleven, but she had met a friend whose son was quartered at the Tower——

"Was what?" I said, vaguely. And she went into fits of laughter and we nearly missed another train through it. "His regiment," she said, presently. "It was lovely going to tea with him there . . . full of ghosts and bones and beef-eaters and——" She had caught sight of an interesting advertisement for beetle powder, and stopped her tale abruptly.

When we reached Mr. Head's offices in Arundel Street, Dorothea said she would remain downstairs and walk about the street. "He'd get muddled with two of us, and probably offer the berth to me. You've got a smut on your nose—no, the right side. That's better. You look stunning. Nita's right about that green—you're a sprite of Spring—she called you that. I didn't. Don't forget to look intelligent, and keep off operations and knives. And casually mention your disapproval of the Sultan of Turkey. Good luck!"

Tremblingly I mounted the stone stairs. I had had so many disappointments; and my funds were so depressingly low.

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"Is Mr. Head in?" I enquired of a small boy who came in answer to my timid knock at a door marked "Private."

"No, he's in Italy."

"Italy!" He had certainly said Italy, but perhaps he had made a mistake. Perhaps he meant Bayswater or Shepherd's Bush.

"Did you say Italy? Italy, the capital of Rome!"

"Yes, miss." The boy put his tongue in his cheek. "First turning to the right and second to the left."

Indignantly I assured him that his master would be apprised of his impudence immediately upon his return; and, bitterly disappointed, I descended the stairs to Dorothea.

She offered sympathy, and suggested adjournment to a vegetarian restaurant, close at hand, for lunch.

"Three courses for sixpence, and flowers and serviettes, and then you'll feel better," she said, taking my arm and moving me with little rushes along the Strand. "It's only half-past twelve; then we'll buy my boots, we'll go to Phit-eesi because I have a small painful bunion; and then you'll be ready for your appointment at two o'clock with Doctor Peignton."

We lunched off lentil soup, a mushroom pudding (bottled mushrooms), and banana fritters. Very filling at the price, but it didn't *stay*. And by the time Dorothea had tried on a seventh pair of boots I was hungrier than ever. I glanced into my purse, and at sight of its contents shut it with a snap. Train fares, 'buses, lunches, teas, had made an enormous hole in mother's five pounds. And she had thought I could *save*. At home at Cousin Janet's, wrapped in a piece of tissue paper in my jewel-case, was the

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sovereign father had purloined from mother. This I was keeping till the end, till I was down at bed-rock. Juanita and Dorothea had talked of their Grand Trunks, but it was out of the question. Oh, that I had a Grand Trunk! Mother would never let me have any more money—there were the gas and water bills, and Abinadab would be wanting things for the garden. Father and Miranda *couldn't*; they were as penniless as I. Grandmother was rich, but—I'd rather scrub floors.

"Dorothea," I murmured, "I am hungry and depressed. Should you mind if I dropped a tear?" We were walking up Bond Street to Grosvenor Square. "I feel weepy, like the mock turtle."

"Wait a little while," she said. "One never knows one's luck. And afterwards I'll treat you to two rounds of buttered toast."

And luck, with winged feet and beckoning finger, came to me in the guise of a very small man with a very big head in a black velvet skull-cap, a short, ragged beard, and badly bitten finger nails.

Yes, he was advertising that very day. It was strange. But coincidences did sometimes occur. He missed his daughter so much. His books were getting in a muddle. And Bywater couldn't arrange the flowers; it took a woman's hands, and he smiled at mine, and I hoped he didn't notice a hole in one of my gloves. No, he didn't require typewriting. It was not professional. He would like good writing and correct spelling. I told him I was always worried with "parallel," and could only get "niece" right by putting it down twice and then staring at it, but

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that on every other word I was sound as a rock. And he said "good," and would I sit down and write an application for the post, and he would then be able to form an idea of my writing and composition.

"Now!" I gasped. And he nodded.

"Oh!" I said, as he put paper, pen and ink in front of me, "I can only use a J pen."

He rang the bell and commanded Bywater to bring a J.

"Now," he said, cheerfully, "I will leave you for a quarter of an hour. Take your time; don't be nervous, and when I return"—he glanced at the clock—"you will hand me the letter."

He told me not to be nervous! And my legs were dithering like a horse's going down hill. And my hands were trembling, and water was trickling down my spine. I sat and stared at the sheet of paper before me as a rabbit, fascinated, stares at a serpent. Ugh! how cold the water was down my back! "Dear Sir," I wrote. No, "Sir" perhaps would be more business-like. I tore the sheet into small fragments and put them into the fire. "Sir," I looked at the word till I was dizzy; then I decided it was too cold and unfriendly. Perhaps Doctor Peignton wanted a friend.

I drew a third sheet of paper towards me. "Dear Sir"—a bell suddenly rang, and I nearly leapt out of my skin. It was only a patient or somebody at the hall door, and I could hear Bywater's calm, courteous voice.

I glanced at the clock. Ten minutes had gone. Only five more left. What *should* I do? The perspiration stood out on my forehead. "Dear Sir"—

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then inspiration came: "Having heard of your great reputation in the profession you adorn"—laughter threatened to overwhelm me here, but I fought it down—"it struck me that you might be in need of a confidential secretary to assist you in the multifarious duties which are bound to accrue in a practice so extensive as I believe yours to be. Permit me, therefore, to offer you my services; and to assure you that, in the event of your appointing me to such a place of trust, I should do all in my power to merit your confidence.

"Thanking you in anticipation for any consideration you may extend to me,

"Believe me to be—etcetera."

"If a girl wrote such a letter to me, I should show her the door," I mused. But there was no time to write another. And Doctor Peignton walked into the room as I hesitated.

"I am afraid the lines are not very straight," I said, "but I'm nervous."

"I hope you're not a nervous subject."

"Oh, no! But it is rather an ordeal, having to write a letter like that." And I smiled fatuously.

He read it through without comment, beyond mentioning that he didn't approve of blind "e's". That clearness and lucidity were the most important factors in writing. And I quite agreed with him, and mentioned that in the future well-opened "e's" should be my constant aim. He just looked at me, and then enquired, if he were to engage me, when I could begin work.

"Now, straightaway," I cried, forgetting all about Dorothea waiting outside in the Square.

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"Monday will be soon enough, thank you. And now about terms. I will not ask for credentials; Dr. Westcott's introduction is good enough. I will give you twenty-five shillings a week to begin with; then, if you suit me, and your work is satisfactory, I will raise you to thirty shillings at the end of three months' time. Your hours will be from nine o'clock to five, and from nine to two on Saturdays. I will explain your duties when you come on Monday."

"Oh, thank you!" I cried, gratefully. "I hope I shall suit you."

"I think you will." And from his voice there suddenly dropped the business tone, and into it crept a note of—of what shall I say? It wasn't exactly tenderness; it was more like a caress—a caress with a blow in it—and as he spoke he placed his hand upon my shoulder, and looked into my face. Backing from him I coloured furiously, and then, at his look of surprise, I felt ashamed. "You remind me of my daughter," he said; and I felt still more ashamed. He was only fatherly, and he was old—quite old—sixty-five at least. Later, when I saw a photograph of his daughter, I wasn't flattered. She was about thirty-five and plain. So plain it almost hurt you to look at her. "I have one condition to make before I finally engage you," he said, business-like again. "A most important one, and one which I shall expect to be observed most faithfully."

"Yes?"

"That you bring a chop with you each day for your lunch and eat it."

"I bring a chop for my lunch?" I stared at him in amazement.

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"Yes. Mr. Brown, my assistant, and I always lunch in, and you can join us. I have a great objection to girls who live on tea, and buns, and cakes. They become anæmic and flabby. Buns are not blood-making. Girls cannot do good work on poor food. A meat meal in the middle of the day I consider essential. Such a meal at a restaurant is expensive. That is why I say bring your chop with you; my man shall cook it for you, and I will give you potatoes and bread. Buy a nice piece of neck or loin, sufficient for two or three days, and cut off a chop at a time."

"But I am going to live at a boarding-house, and I shall have nowhere to keep a loin or neck. I can't hang them up in my wardrobe."

He moved impatiently. "Some girls are without any resource. Don't let me think you are one of them. Surely your boarding-house will contain a larder."

"I suppose it will, but——"

"You think you will miss your lunch-hour out of doors?"

"Yes."

"You can go for a walk each day when you've had your meal."

"Very well," I agreed. But the prospect of chops ahead for months somewhat depressed me. He rang for Bywater to show me out and, bidding me good-afternoon, said he should expect me on Monday.

"Well?" said Dorothea, when I joined her outside.

"I've got a berth. Twenty-five shillings a week to begin with, and a rise in three months," I shouted.

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"Dorothea"—I dropped my voice—"you like running. Shall we—run now?"

"There's my bunion——"

"Never mind it. Pretend it isn't there. Come." And, seizing her hand, we rushed madly round the Square. "Keep away from Doctor Peignton's house; he might be alarmed. There, now I feel better," I panted; "and a policeman is watching us."

"I *am* glad," said Dorothea. "We'll go and have the buttered toast now. Bond Street is too expensive. We'll go to Callard's in Regent Street." And we each had two rounds of very buttery toast and a tea-cake.

"I feel so happy I am afraid I shall burst," I remarked. And when Dorothea suggested that it wasn't happiness, but the toast, I told her she was vulgar, but that, even so, I would continue to be her friend, my love for her being of very great dimensions.

"It will pass," said Dorothea. "I know the feeling. Everything is *couleur de rose*. The streets are paved with gold, the smoke is opalescent vapour, the chimney-pots take on the semblance of fantastic statuary. You yearn to help suffering humanity. A blind man fills you with a philanthropic ecstasy. You drop a penny into his hat, letting not your left hand know what your right hand giveth. You buy pencils, and jumping-frogs, and iron-holders from every hawker at every street corner, and then—the reaction comes. I don't want to depress you, or to be pessimistic, but suicides usually occur in these moments of reaction. The strain has been——"

"Your conversation is most fascinating," I inter-

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rupted, gently, "but I am afraid I must leave you. I promised to let Mr. Owen Westcott know if Doctor Peignton engaged me, so I must go to Wimpole Street, and I will join you later."

Dorothea sat and gaped.

"What age is Mr. Westcott?"

"That," I said, "has nothing whatever to do with the question in point. A promise is a promise."

Dorothea still gaped.

"Where shall I meet you?"

"Oh, anywhere."

"A bit vague. Shall we say Peter Robinson's blouse window at five o'clock?"

"Ye-s."

And her mouth was still a little open when I left her.

The streets were thronged with people, the shop windows gay with Spring novelties, and London lay in a soft, hazy light. This blue haze which hovers over great cities is not as beautiful as the mist which enshrouds the hills, but surely it is more kindly? For does it not help to soften and cover up all the ugliness, and dirt, and squalor? London half-revealed becomes magical. Its houses and spires, in that soft, mystic light, are transformed into palaces and minarets of the East. At that moment I loved the great metropolis. The fascination of London had entered into my being. I experienced the thrill of noise, of movement, of roaring, surging humanity. I was an atom unknown, and because of that I revelled in it. I was unknown—that was the delight.

Like Dorothea, I made little spurts through Cav-

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endish Square. The trees, at least, were trimming their bare branches with little, green, shaky buds, and I smiled from sheer pleasure. Now I was getting very near to Mr. Westcott's. I wondered whether he would be in. Probably not. And a sensation of disappointment crept through me. But, yes, to my enquiry Mr. Westcott *was* in. But it was doubtful whether he would see me at this hour of the day. "Ask him," I said, smilingly, to the manservant. "Say Miss Hilary Forrest." He went away ungraciously. His master was tired, and had only just returned from a long round of visits. He was back in a minute. "Yes, Mr. Westcott will see you," he said, in a voice that clearly indicated he was not responsible for his master's actions; and he showed me into the surgery.

"Doctor Peignton has engaged me, Mr. Westcott," I began, without any preamble. "You asked me to let you know, and I said I would."

"Yes," he said. "I wondered whether you would keep your promise, Miss Hilary. I—I was thinking of you when the servant came to tell me you were here."

"How funny!" I murmured.

"No. I don't think it was. I have had a weary depressing day. People's nerves affect one's own at times. And when I had finished, and sat down to rest, my eye caught sight of your card lying on the table. And instantly the mists cleared away. Do you know, you are a very stimulating person, Miss Hilary. I say, again, that your father was right in objecting to the name of Martha for you."

I laughed, and was at once at my ease.

HILARY ON HER OWN

"Now tell me all about Doctor Peignton." And I launched into my story. I told him of the letter and the agony I had gone through over its composition. I told him of Doctor Peignton's criticism of my blind "e's," of the salary I was to receive and the number of hours a day I was to work. And gravely Mr. Westcott listened; and was it fancy that, as I talked, the tired look slowly faded from his eyes? I hoped so. Somehow I wanted this taciturn, grave, solemn person to laugh and be happy and young. There was so much happiness in the world, why should he set himself out to be weary and depressed? He was evidently rich, and must be clever to have such a connection—or reputation, perhaps I ought to say—and he must be strong with a physique like his. It might be that he was unhappily married; his wife might drink. I suddenly found myself longing to know what she was like. Whether she was pretty and gay? or whether she, too, was tired and depressed? or whether she drank?

"Yes, Miss Hilary, you were saying——"

I collected my straying thoughts in some confusion.

"I was saying—oh, that there are drawbacks, of course. Doctor Peignton has a beard, and he insists upon my having a chop every day with my lunch; he will give me the bread and potatoes, and his man shall cook the chop."

"But what has that got to do with Doctor Peignton's beard?" he asked, bewildered.

"Oh, nothing! I only remarked, in passing, he had a beard, and I have a great dislike to them, but it's the chop that's worrying me. He suggested my

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buying a loin or neck of mutton, and cutting off a chop each day. He doesn't want me to lunch on buns and tea. He says they will make me anæmic. He doesn't seem inclined to make me a present of the chop as well as the potatoes and bread, and I know chops are dear, unless you buy New Zealand ones."

Mr. Westcott laughed slowly, and not so painfully, I thought; though it ended just as abruptly. Perhaps he was unaccustomed to laugh, and required oiling, like a piece of machinery rusty through disuse. He settled himself back in his chair as one who prepares for a long conversation; but, rising, I said I must go.

"But have you told me everything? You see, I know Peignton, and I trust I shall become better acquainted with you, Miss Hilary. And I shall take an interest in your welfare. I hope it is not going to be a case of 'Ships.'" And it did not strike me as curious that this busy man should have time to be interested in a comparative stranger.

"You see, you are such a big ship, a man-of-war, or an American liner, and I am only a very small craft—a herring-boat"—I laughed. "Won't you be too grand?"

"Grand! Why, child, the middle-aged always deem it an honour to be allowed to associate with those who are fresh and unspoiled. We are dusty, and stuffy, and gidovy——"

"But your wife?"

"I haven't got a wife"—and the smile which was slow, and yet so illuminating, crept into his face. "What made you think I had a wife?"

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"Oh, I thought you looked like it."

"Oh, did you?" he said.

"What I mean is, you looked depressed." And now he laughed outright.

"I think I am getting a little muddled. It's the excitement," I explained.

"The prospect of earning twenty-five shillings a week?"

"I know it doesn't seem much to you." And I glanced round the beautifully furnished room. "But for me it means independence."

"You don't mean to say you are going to live on that?"

For a moment I hesitated. And then: "Forgive me," he said. "I shouldn't have asked such a question."

"I don't mind," I assured him. "In fact I was really considering if I *could* live on it. But there will be a way, and my home people might possibly help. Good-bye and thank you, Mr. Westcott. I owe this situation to you, and I am grateful. My Cousin Dorothea is waiting for me."

"But this won't be good-bye, surely. You are not going to be a stand-off herring-boat?" He seemed quite anxious and worried; and I didn't know what to say.

"You will let me have your address when you are settled? My mother—she lives with me—would call upon you, but she is a great invalid. I wonder whether you would come and see her?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," I said. And Mr. Owen Westcott himself saw me out of the front door; and this time watched me down the street.

CHAPTER XII

IN QUEST OF A BOARDING-HOUSE

THERE seem to be half a million boarding-houses in Bloomsbury alone," said Juanita, with a laugh. "Most of them keep an excellent and liberal table, and all of them have home comforts and young cheerful society."

"You had better remain on here for a time," said Cousin Janet, who was engaged in converting a cocoa tin into a hair-tidy for a bazaar. "We shall be very glad, and your salary won't be very large at first."

I thanked her, but shook my head.

"I have been working it out," said Dorothea. "Hilary will not find any boarding-house in London where she can live for less than a pound a week. Her chop we will reckon at fourpence a day; that comes to one and eightpence a week, presuming that the boarding-house proprietor will give her lunch on Saturday. That leaves three and fourpence for 'bus fares, clothes, amusements, collection on Sundays, medical attendance and incidental expenses." There were times when even Dorothea was depressing.

"I shall soon be getting a rise."

"But in the meantime?"

"You must approach your mother." This suggestion was from Cousin Janet.

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"It is out of the question. It isn't altogether that mother won't, but can't."

"She would have your keep, if you were at home."

"She says that makes no difference. One amongst so many isn't noticed."

"Really?"

"I don't eat as much as all that," I said.

"I was thinking of the buttered toast yesterday," said Dorothea, mildly.

"That was in a moment of exaltation."

"To return to the point under discussion. Can Hilary manage to live on twenty-five shillings a week in London without getting into debt?" asked Juanita, in her calm, judicial voice.

"Working-men do, in the East End, with a wife and several children."

"Do you propose to live in the East End?"

"No."

"Well, let us, above all things, be practical."

"Your grandmother was sympathetic, was she not?" asked Cousin Janet.

"Yes, very. But I couldn't go to her for help."

"And that's just what I think you could, and should, and ought," said Juanita. "You say she is wealthy, that it was through her assistance you managed to win your mother over to giving her consent to your leaving home; and now, just because she is a bit crotchety-tempered and plain-spoken, as old ladies often are, you refuse to give her the pleasure of helping you out of a financial difficulty. I am disappointed in you, Hilary. You think you are proud-spirited and independent, whereas you are simply small and unforgiving." Her voice was so gentle

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and without malice that, though her words stung, I could not resent them.

"I didn't know I was small and unforgiving," I said, with reddened cheeks. "I will write to grandmother, if you really think it will be a pleasure to her to give or lend. It isn't to most people."

"It is to all *nice* people who can afford."

"Grandmother nice!" I felt topsy-turvy. She was honourable, of course. Her word was her bond. She was charitable to the poor of Ridgemoor, and she had always been good to father. But her tongue!

"You see, we all have our faults," observed Juanita, interrupting my train of thought. "And your grandmother's may be a little more obvious than most people's, and that again may be accounted for by the sincerity of her disposition."

"I will write to-night," I said. "And this is a very astonishing world."

"Of course it is. And when we cease to be astonished we shall be getting old. We will now go and look for your boarding-house. If you will insist upon going on Saturday, and leaving us desolated, no time should be lost in searching for a suitable abode for you. Are you coming, too, Thea?"

Dorothea shook her head. "I am taking Mrs. Wagstaff's children to look for birds' nests."

"Where, to Hammersmith?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, quite crossly. "We are going into the country, to a place not very far from Richmond—I don't just remember the name; and it is full of birds' nests."

"In March?"

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"Yes. Do you expect nests to be found in December?"

Juanita chuckled, and Cousin Janet regarded her younger daughter with pensive eyes.

I will spare the reader a description of the fifteen boarding-houses we saw and the fifteen landladies we interviewed that morning. And when I say landladies, I mean proprietresses. Boarding-houses, I suppose, are much the same all the world over, and the proprietresses thereof cut from the same pattern. And not a *chic* Parisian pattern, but the *Home Notes* variety, with flannelette blouses, home-made, jumping away from short tartan skirts, with elbow sleeves revealing scraggy arms, and with stock collars limp and droopy, and pins innumerable sticking out from everywhere.

"A pound a week! They are very low terms," they said.

"Of course, lunch and tea out," ingratiatingly.

"Oh, you are in business?"—manœuvring, worthy of the Channel fleet, us towards the front door.

"Yes, I am a secretary."

"Oh, a typewriter."

"You mean a typist. A typewriter is a machine."

"Yes; same thing."

"Well, I'm not exactly a machine. I'm——"

"Very sorry, but we have no vacancies."

"I am becoming hysterical," said Juanita. "To talk of meals may appear heartless, but unless we instantly adjourn to a restaurant for sustenance I shall shriek."

I mentioned that Lockhart's tea-shops were clean and comfortable.

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She closed her eyes, and said: "So is the Holborn."

I repeated my observation about Lockhart's. And she said she hated proverbs, and sayings, and adages, and platitudes. Finally we compromised by going to a Lyon's. She admitted the crescents were not bad, but one didn't want to lunch off crescents, so we had scrambled eggs and coffee.

Then greatly refreshed we made our way back to the Museum and surrounding country and struck a cheaper street, but all the top-floor backs had smuts in the water-jugs, and bags up the chimneys.

"You'll have to raise your price," said Juanita at length. "Bloomsbury is an attractive neighbourhood, but I have no wish to spend the remainder of my life here."

"One more place," I pleaded, squeezing her arm. "I've kept it to the last on my list. It's not in Bloomsbury; it's in Nottingham Place, wherever that may be. The advertisement doesn't mention any of the home comforts and liberal table, and young and cheerful society, and electric light, so I think it sounds promising."

"I know where it is; come along," said Juanita.

We took a 'bus to Oxford Circus, and then changed into a District, and when I found myself travelling Cavendish Square way I was strangely pleased.

"The doctors' quarters," I remarked, cheerfully, and Juanita said Harley and Wimpole streets invariably made her think of anæsthetics and funerals.

A bright-faced country girl replied to our ring at number—perhaps I had better not mention the number, the Misses Sparrow might not like publicity—

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they are so sensitive—so I will just refer to it as Nottingham Place. She was not dressed—I mean she was not in the regulation afternoon black dress and streamered cap and India-rubber collar and cuffs, such as the Bloomsbury drabs had worn, but her print dress was pink and fresh and pretty, and her apron was spotless, and she smiled such a welcome at us that we walked in without waiting for an invitation.

Would we excuse the drawing-room not being quite finished? she asked. The man had not been to put up the curtain-poles, but if we would sit down the mistress would be with us in a minute.

“Haven’t you made a mistake?” whispered Juanita. “It looks”—surveying the room—“far too well furnished and superior for a boarding-house.”

I referred to the slip of paper in my hand, upon which I had written down the numerous addresses. “No, it’s quite right.”

“But look at the carpet.”

“I’m looking.”

“And there are no consol-tables, or gilded mirrors, or ornate over-mantels.”

“All the better.”

“But the water-colours; they are exquisite!”

“It is educating to live among pleasant surroundings.”

The door opened gently, and a very diminutive and quite the sweetest-looking little lady I had ever met entered the room shyly, and yet composedly. It was impossible to locate her age; she was of that type which practically looks the same from twenty to forty. There were no lines on her smooth skin, her

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hair was abundant and glossy, her eyes were brown and very bright, and her figure was so slight that one could imagine her being able to crawl through one of the old-fashioned croquet-hoops with ease. She begged of us to be seated, and then gave Juanita a quick, darting glance, like a robin.

"I am afraid we have come to the wrong address. We were looking for a boarding-house for my cousin."

"But this *is* a boarding-house. At least it will be one very shortly. My sister and I only came in a few days ago, and we are, as you see, not quite straight. The curtain-pole and stair-eye man has been unreliable."

"I expect your terms will be too high for me," I said, bluntly; my heart beating high with the hope that she would say "No."

She hesitated. "Well, we've not quite settled them yet. What—what did you wish to pay?"

"I would like to pay anything you asked," I said, looking round the pretty room and then at her sweet face, "but I am sorry to say I can only afford a pound a week."

"That is not *very* much," she murmured, gently.

"It is *very* little. I should love to be able to pay more, but I cannot at present. I am going to work. I have my living to make."

"Oh!" she said, looking quite relieved, "that alters the position. One is bound to reduce one's terms to people—especially girls—who earn their livings. Would you kindly excuse me for a moment? I must consult my sister." She hurried, almost ran, from the room, and carefully closed the door behind her.

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"What a dear!" said Juanita.

"She's perfectly sweet. Did you see her curtsy when she entered the room? Oh, I should love to come here! But it would be too I haven't the money."

"Most nice things are expensive."

"Excepting things like moonlight on br waves, and meadows starred with daisies and l cups."

"But you can't live on moonlight and butter

"Ah, Juanita, that's the trouble," I groaned

The little lady was returning, and she was fo by another little lady the exact counterpart o self, only that this one had grey eyes and faire

"My sister thinks we could easily let a small small room on the top floor for the sum ment It really isn't worth any more, because"—her dropped to a whisper—"it has no fireplace."

"That won't matter a bit," I cried, reckless shouldn't have cared if she said the roof leake always sleep with my window open, and most fireplaces we saw this morning had bags u chimneys."

"Bags!" they ejaculated. "How very unhea They looked at me to continue the conversation

"When can you let me come in? And do y quire a reference?"

"A reference!" Now they both blushed.

"Is it not usual to ask for a reference?"

"We don't think so, but we are not sure. An we don't want one from you," they assure warmly.

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I thanked them, and had to hold myself from squeezing their dainty little fingers.

"Would you?"—they glanced at each other, and then whispered—"would you like to see the room? The mats are not on the washstand at present. But they shall be when you arrive. If you will excuse them to-day."

"Oh, don't!" I cried, almost in tears. "Don't apologise about things like mats. It is so awfully good of you to take me at all. I am sure it won't pay you. I shall only be in to breakfast and dinner, but I have a terrific appetite. I'm quite ashamed of it."

"My dear!"

"We shall never grudge food, I hope, to any of our guests. It is too dreadful to think of." They looked really distressed and simply flew up the staircase in front of us.

"This is the room; it's small but sunny," they said, breathlessly and apologetically. "We were obliged to put a companion washhand-stand and dressing-table, and there's only one chair, but there's a small table and a very small wardrobe. If there isn't sufficient room in it we could put you some pegs and a curtain outside on the landing."

"My dresses are few, and I wonder why all boarding-house ladies are not like you," I said.

They blushed again. "We've never kept one before, and I am afraid we must strike you as being very——"

"Unbusiness-like?" suggested Juanita.

They nodded.

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"Shall you take everybody for a pound a week?" I enquired.

"Oh, no!"—they spoke airily and carelessly—"the other rooms are larger. We have six gentlemen and one old lady already. The old lady has the loveliest white crimped hair. One gentleman is paying us three guineas a week for one of the large front bedrooms. He is a little particular about light and draughts. He cannot sleep with a ray of light in the room, and was almost—well, not rude, but unpolite about the white blinds. Dark-green ones, he thinks, are the only things that answer. So we are putting heavy dark curtains that will draw, and another one in front of the door, in case there may be a draught. We are afraid he is delicate. Then another gentleman is paying two and a half guineas, and three two guineas, and a young bank clerk named Pidge—peculiar name, Pidge—is paying—well, quite enough. We think those are pretty good terms. They are all coming in on Saturday, the day after to-morrow. We shall be ready then. Then we've had several letters, making inquiries; and we think we shall soon be quite full."

"You'll overflow," said Juanita. "All the Bloomsbury boarders would come if they knew. Is this—pardon my asking you—your first venture at this sort of thing?"

"Yes," the little lady who came to us first spoke. "We've always lived in the country with our dear mother. We were very poor, but, oh, so happy! Bobbie"—she pointed to her sister, and Juanita and I quite jumped; she was so very unlike a Bobbie. "Roberta is her name," she explained, apparently

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reading our thoughts. "Bobbie gave music lessons and I made cakes and sweets—rather superior ones—which our friends bought for their 'At Home' days."

"Yes," Miss Bobbie spoke now. "And it was so funny meeting Susie's cakes out. Our friends pretended we didn't know them, and they would beg us to try a little as they were so delicious, especially the almond icing. And we had to hide our faces behind our handkerchiefs and muffs to keep from laughing."

"Mamma"—Miss Susie took up the story—"had a small pension—papa was in the Civil Service—but it died with her, and we only had twenty pounds a year to live on. We found it a little difficult to quite manage on this"—she looked apologetic—"although we only paid three shillings a week for our cottage, but it was the coal—coal *is* such an expensive item."

"Yes," I agreed, nodding my head. "It's the coal and gas. That's what my mother says. They are the ruin of the home."

"We used lamps," said Miss Bobbie. "But, to make a long story short, as we mustn't detain you, a dear aunt of ours offered to lend us a sum of money to start a boarding-house. She said we were peculiarly fitted for it, and I can't think why."

"I think I can," said Juanita, softly—so softly that I don't think they heard her.

"She lent us eight hundred pounds, *eight hundred pounds!*" The magnitude of the sum caused them both to sit down suddenly on my future bed. "We have spent it on furniture—we have been to the most exciting and beautiful sales—and on the first six months' rent and taxes. It was a tremendous plunge to take."

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"And we took it," finished Miss Susie, with the gasp as of one who had just taken a header into the sea.

"Oh, I do hope you will be successful!" Juanita and I cried together. "And that no one will take advantage of——" Juanita paused.

"Of our ignorance?" they suggested, humbly.

"Of your tender hearts," finished Juanita.

"And I shall pay you more the minute I begin to earn more, if you will trust me now. And I am so very, very glad to have found you. My mother will be so relieved. She looks upon boarding-houses in London as dens of iniquity, and most of them appear to absolutely reek of middle-class respectability, dullness, and a smell of cooking."

"We must be careful of that," Miss Susie told her sister, earnestly. "There must be no smell of cooking in our house. We must always keep the baize doors shut."

"And I can come on Saturday?"

They whispered together for a moment—then: "Would it be in time for lunch or dinner?"

"Dinner, please." And I devoutly hoped I had said the right thing.

"Yes; we shall be quite ready to welcome you by then," they assured me, looking very relieved.

"And may I ask you your name? Mine is Hilary Forrest."

"Sparrow." Now Juanita and I found it quite impossible to help jumping again—perhaps Robin would have been still more appropriate, but Sparrow was nearly as good.

"I wonder why they hesitated about the hour I

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was to arrive," I said, after we had bidden them good-bye and were walking to Baker Street Station.

"I expected they wanted the washhand-stand mats to be home from the laundry."

"That would be it," I agreed. And Juanita laughed and said I was an extremely lucky girl.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE MISSES SPARROW'S HIGH-CLASS BOARDING- HOUSE

IT was a wrench, leaving my gay, friendly kindly cousins. They had chaffed me about "my doctor," as they called Doctor Peignton. They had rocked about the chop; they had screamed when I sighed at his having a beard. "But, of course, there is a drawback to everything in life," I said. And when Cousin Janet observed it might prove a blessing in disguise, as old men were frequently dangerous, Tony became quite delirious, and, putting down his latest puzzle, leant against a sofa-cushion and gently wept.

"You are such an easily amused family," I told them. "Mother would be weeping."

"But, surely, as he is old and has got a beard . . ."

"She would still weep. She was hoping against hope that I should fail and return home."

"I am rather sorry for your mother," Cousin Janet said. "I am so glad my girls don't want to be secretaries."

"That is base of you," I returned. "You led me to think you sympathised with me, Cousin Janet."

"I sympathise with everybody," she said, somewhat vaguely, regarding a ginger-jar she was converting into a flower-pot, with thoughtful eyes.

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Cousin Janet had a passion for "using up" things: merry-thoughts became pen-wipers, pantry towels blossomed into toilet mats, walnuts into thimble cases, drain pipes into umbrella stands, cocoa tins into hair-tidies, and roller towelling into casement curtains. Juanita tactfully gave them to bazaars, and they may have found purchasers—one never knew.

"Good-bye, everybody," I said, "and thank you all a thousand times. I have never had such a lovely time in my life."

"Come to supper every Sunday," said Cousin Janet.

"Always carry an umbrella and a parcel," admonished Juanita.

"Don't forget your blind 'e's,'" cautioned Dorothea.

"And be gentle with the six gentlemen boarders," pleaded Tony. "Foreign gentlemen's hearts are as impressionable as putty."

"How do you know they are foreigners?" I paused in the doorway to enquire.

"Sure to be at a boarding-house. I give you three months to fall in love, six to be engaged, twelve to be married."

"Once again I must inform you that I have not come to London with the object of being married," I retorted, trying to keep my temper. "The very thought is obnoxious—"

"You'll miss your train," said Juanita, pushing me into the cab. "Good-bye, Hilary."

Everybody waved and kissed their hands and

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shouted: "Good luck!" And I drove away to my new life very contented and very happy.

By six o'clock I and my disreputable tin trunks were installed comfortably at the Misses Sparrow's high-class boarding-house. I glanced round my tiny bedroom. Juanita was right in a sense, but not quite right. It wasn't washstand mats, though they were there. It was an extremely comfortable wicker-work chair, placed in the sunny little window, for my room faced west, with a cushion in its back and a hassock at its feet. And as I stood wondering whether I should laugh or cry at their kindness a little knock came at the door, and Miss Bobbie stood there shy and breathless.

"There's no soap," she said, in a mysterious whisper. "Somebody told us if we wished to make the place pay we mustn't provide soap. It seems horrible and mean to us; it goes dreadfully against the grain, because a piece of soap is such a small thing, but my sister says we must make a stand at the beginning, and"—her voice became almost inaudible—"if you haven't any with you, I—I could lend you a piece for to-night."

I thanked her, strangling the laughter in my voice. In a flash she had whisked a cake of soap out of her pocket, slipped it into the soap-dish and vanished.

I sat down in the new wicker chair, and then I laughed, simply to keep the tears away as I pictured her telling each of the six gentlemen boarders in her pretty, shamefaced manner that she and her sister didn't "find" soap.

My belongings were soon in order; my scanty

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wardrobe hung up; my linen and books put away; and in an India-muslin white frock, which had come out of the old chest and had been washed and ironed till it would hardly hold together, I descended the staircase as the second gong sounded for dinner. Miss Bobbie was waiting for me at the dining-room door. "They are all there," she whispered. "I thought you might be shy. I—I am not used to gentlemen, but my sister is so brave. Will you go first?"—she gave me a little push, and, as I was a good deal taller than she, she managed to creep into the room without being observed. The six men stared, two half rose from their seats and bowed, and one pulled out the chair to which Miss Sparrow motioned me, and then, with a suppressed sigh of relief, returned to his soup, which was artichoke and which every now and again caused him to draw his moustache into his mouth with a horrible sucking sound in order to clear it. German, I thought. I glanced rapidly round the table for the old lady with the white crimped hair. There she was, and she smiled pleasantly. She wore a black satin gown with a fine lace crossover fichu, and resting like a butterfly on her beautiful snowy hair was a delicate scrap of point lace. Just like a cameo she was, and I felt glad for her to be there.

My left-hand neighbour had a neat, pointed black beard, high shoulders, and snored slightly into his soup. French, I commented—and quickly dropped my eyes as he turned round and gave me a prolonged stare.

No one spoke, and I stared at the tablecloth and salt cellars till a plate of chicken was gently pushed

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under my nose. I was unaccustomed at that time to the frightful, the appalling silences which descend upon the inmates of boarding-houses when they take their meals. It isn't, I am convinced, that they don't want to talk—they simply daren't. They would give all they possessed to have the courage to pass the remark that it had been a fine day; or, to be nearer the truth, a wet one. But if they did, everybody would stop eating and listen. Small tables with four people at each should be compulsory in these places of abode.

Miss Susie made a gallant effort: "How the days are putting out!" she commented to the table, generally.

"Pardon?" said the Frenchman at my side so loudly that she dropped her carving-knife with a clatter.

"I only remarked how the days were putting out," she murmured, apologetically.

"The days are—are pootin' out," he repeated, vaguely.

"Lengthening," explained Miss Bobbie.

He returned to his chicken and sausage with a shrug. Fancy taking a man away from his dinner to talk of trifles of that description.

"Yes," I said, warmly, "isn't it delightful?" I wanted to help the Misses Sparrow; Miss Susie should not be snubbed, and yet when everybody looked up I went scarlet.

"March is such a hopeful month," continued Miss Bobbie, signalling to the parlour-maid to hand the bread sauce to a pale, stoutish youth who sat opposite to me.

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"Beastly east winds," grunted a black frock-coated man, who looked like stocks and shares, and undoubtedly hailed from Lancashire.

"But the birds," said Miss Bobbie, "they begin to sing so beautifully in March."

"There are no birds in London, only sparrows," observed the pale youth, putting a large piece of sausage into his mouth, "and they make an infernal din." There was silence for a space after this awkward remark, and the Misses Sparrow covertly wiped their heated faces.

"Try the theatre," signalled Miss Bobbie to her sister, but Miss Susie was exhausted with dissecting chickens and wondering how the puddings would turn out.

"I will try," I said to myself. They were taking me for one pound a week, and I *must* help them. "What do you think of boarding-houses in London? I mean the ones you happen to know." I put the question casually, comprehensively, to the whole table, to the six gentlemen who were so evidently enjoying their well-cooked dinner, and I might have hurled a bomb-shell in their midst. Five of them laid down their knives and forks on their plates, or against the edge of their plates, according to their nationality, each of them stared at me for a full ten seconds, and then they all began to talk at once. The ball of conversation was started rolling with a vengeance and the Misses Sparrow looked at me gratefully. They, the gentlemen, told me many things of the Bloomsbury and Bayswater boarding-houses, some of which I could hardly believe. I will draw a veil over what they said. The Misses Sparrow's

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eyes grew round and their lips parted, and I congratulated myself and thanked Heaven that I had been led to Nottingham Place. Drawn together by a bond of grievance, the five men forgot their hostesses; they forgot the old lady and me, and, turning to one another, they laid their own souls and the souls of their late landladies bare. And what about the sixth man? Surely I said there were six gentlemen boarders. There were the Frenchman, the German, the man from Lancashire, the pale, stout youth, the baldheaded, three-guinea-a-week, afraid-of-draughts man (at least so I judged him to be), and where was the sixth? Why didn't he discuss Bloomsbury boarding-house proprietresses? I glanced round the table in search of him; there he was sitting by the old lady, and as I looked he raised his face and smiled at me. And it was such a kindly, humorous and yet half-shy smile that I promptly returned it, my spirits rising with a bound. They were not all stodgy—this man was interesting and well-bred. He didn't brandish a toothpick and—suddenly I remembered that mother had said, "Never be too friendly with a stranger," and by stranger, of course, she meant strange man. My eyes sought my plate. "Always be discreet, dignified and even cold." I waited till the sweets had been removed before I peeped in his direction again. His eyes were glued to his Camembert cheese. Perhaps he, too, had been warned to be reserved and distant in his behaviour towards casual girls met at boarding-houses, and was already regretting his friendliness. I took a mustard-pot into my line of vision. Surely it was non-committal to stare at a silver mustard-

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pot, and it was preferable to the white face of the podgy youth directly opposite to me. Finally I thought I might venture to take one more peep in the direction of the old lady, and her neighbour's head was still bent. "Dull and nervous," I pronounced, washing my hands of him; and then Miss Sparrow signalled that dinner was finished by half getting up and then looking scared and sitting down because the podgy youth took a long drink of water. However, Miss Bobbie and I made for the door, which was opened for us by the shy man, and Miss Sparrow and Miss Bobbie nearly fell over each other in waiting for the old lady and me to go out first.

When we reached the warm, well-lit, pleasant drawing-room, the two sisters gave vent to long sighs of relief that the meal was over.

"You won't mind us, dear," they cried, "but we must discuss it"—the old lady had gone upstairs—"and we don't want to leave you alone. Oh, Bobbie, did you see the merry-thought fly off the dish? It just missed Mr. Inglis, and I thought I should die from shame. I was gently bending it back; I can usually dissect a merry-thought without the slightest difficulty, but this was so springy."

"I know, dear"—there was intense sympathy in Miss Bobbie's voice—"but I shouldn't worry about it. It didn't hit Mr. Inglis, and that is the main point. But do you know"—her voice dropped—"the cauliflowers gave out, and I chose them myself—two very large ones."

"It was the stout youth," I said. "It wasn't the cauliflower's fault. He took such enormous helpings. I couldn't help watching him."

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"Mr. Pidge," they cried together.

"If that is his name, it suits him. But I should tell Dainton and Kate only to hand things once to him."

"My dear!" They were inexpressibly shocked.

"You won't make the house pay if they do," I pronounced, shaking my head.

"But we can't grudge anybody—cauliflower."

"You'll have to raise his terms then." They exchanged glances.

"Surely, surely," I cried, "you've not reduced your terms to him?"

"But he's poor. He's only a small clerk in a bank."

"But he's got a big appetite," I wailed. "I shall leave to-morrow."

They sat down, and then jumped up, and then again sat down and clasped their hands. "Aren't you comfortable? The room is——"

"Oh, Miss Sparrow, Miss Bobbie. Comfortable! You are too good. Look at the lovely comfortable chair, and dear little room, and sweet washstand mats with butterflies—I'm sure they have seen better—I mean they are not accustomed to being in a boarding-house."

"Our dear mother worked them," they said, gently and reverently.

"I knew it. And you give me all these things, and chicken, and sausages, and every comfort for one pound a week. Why, in Bloomsbury they wanted thirty and thirty-five shillings for a tiny top-floor back, dingy and grimy and smelling of apples and

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mice and red rep valances. It would be simply robbery on my part to remain with you. I am sure you could let my room like lightning. And I shall go till I am earning more money and can pay you properly."

"Oh, my dear! oh, my dear!" They stopped and looked at one another. And then Miss Bobbie, with a couple of tears shining in her eyes, said softly: "Believe me, Miss Forrest, but we feel the obligation to be entirely on our side. We said so to each other this morning. Didn't we, Susie? It is so cheerful having a young girl in the house. And you will help us in entertaining the gentlemen. You see, we are not accustomed to men. We only knew the vicar of the parish in our old home, and we were not nervous of him; he suffered from asthma and wore knitted grey woollen socks which gave one a homely feeling. But really, positively I know you will think it foolish, my sister and I are a wee bit frightened of the sterner sex and we feel that you will be such a comfort, such a prop—if you will excuse my referring to you as though you were a support for a clothes line. Look how you started a conversation at dinner which proved not only exciting but almost alarming, after that dreadful, dreadful silence which made me so nervous I could hardly see properly. I thought cook had left the tail feathers in the chickens as though they were pheasants, and Susie dear," turning to her sister and forgetting me, "we must never put extras in the bills—meals in the bedroom or baths, or accidents to crockery or linen if used for photographic purposes. You see how it has annoyed the poor gentlemen. And we must never have foreign meat, espe-

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cially New Zealand mutton which reminds them of the smell of long-haired sheep on a wet day. I know the smell, peculiarly offensive."

"And the bacon," chipped in Miss Susie. "How they have objected to American flank. I, myself, must confess to a partiality for Deny's smoked back, or best Wiltshire. And what beautiful teeth Mr. Inglis has," she finished somewhat irrelevantly. Miss Bobbie and I looked at her.

"Oh, it was speaking of New Zealand mutton made me think of them," she explained.

"Is Mr. Inglis the man who sat by the old lady?" I enquired.

"Yes, by Mrs. Darbyshire. Isn't he handsome? My sister and I prefer a man with a moustache. So manly and military—" she paused and blushed.

"Well, there's nothing to be ashamed of if we do," said Miss Bobbie recklessly.

"I like a man any way, moustache or no moustache," I vowed, more with the idea of setting Miss Susie at her ease than anything else, and as the words left me the sisters gave me a series of such extraordinary winks and nods and signs that I paused in astonishment and stared at them. Then a rustle of a newspaper behind me told me that somebody was there, and without looking round I knew instinctively it was Mr. Inglis, and that he had heard my candid confession. Was he in the habit of creeping in and out of rooms like an Indian on the trail? I asked myself in annoyance. Afterwards Miss Bobbie said that it wasn't his fault, the carpets were thick and my voice was very much raised.

I picked up a book, bade the Misses Sparrow good-

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night, and, without so much as a glance at the big open *Times* behind which some man was seated, walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV

A VISIT TO RICHMOND

SUNDAY is a day that no man or woman hankers after spending in a boarding-house, however comfortable or attractive the boarding-house may be. So the afternoon found me calling upon Lady Waterson at Richmond. "You should call at once," Cousin Janet had advised. "Common politeness demands it after so much kindness." So I went and thoroughly enjoyed myself, for some charming people and Mr. Owen Westcott were present.

At first I was a little nervous, and when I had rung the front-door bell of the imposing-looking house I experienced the same sensation in the neighbourhood of my spine and knees as had attacked me at Dr. Peignton's. The footman inspired me with no awe (men servants were as common as blackberries to me now), neither did the second footman, nor the butler who took me from the second footman and with slow, ponderous steps bodyguarded me up the handsome staircase to the drawing-room; but the noisy, laughing tea-drinking crowd revealed when the door was thrown open alarmed me and involuntarily I paused. "If only I had a train," I reflected; "it's so lonely going into a crowded drawing-room in a short gown." And then Lady Waterson advanced, stately

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and handsome in grey velvet, and her expression was so friendly and her smile so kindly that my nervousness vanished and in a couple of minutes I was drinking tea and chatting easily with Sir John, her husband. Sir John Waterson was a moderate-sized man with a brainy forehead, twinkling blue eyes and an infectious laugh. He introduced me to one or two people sitting near to us and then wandered away to be polite to some other guests. A newspaper man, the sub-editor of a provincial paper, enquired politely if I thought that Ibsen plays were of a depressing or stimulating influence upon the public, and I was searching about for something illuminating by way of reply without revealing my entire ignorance upon the subject when the door opened and Mr. Westcott was announced. So interested and pleased was I that I forgot all about the sub-editor waiting for my views, and when Mr. Westcott, after shaking hands with Sir John and Lady Waterson, looked rapidly round the room as though in search of someone, I could hardly restrain myself from getting up and motioning him to my side and saying, "Don't mind anybody else; do come and talk to me." But now he was bowing to several acquaintances, and chatting with two or three friends, and disappointedly I leant back in my chair and tried to tell the newspaper man what I thought of Ibsen. And what I said must have been so dull and unilluminating that presently the newspaper man rose upon a pretext of getting some more tea, and as he went Mr. Westcott crossed the room and, quietly slipping into the vacant chair by me, said: "How do you do, Miss Hilary?"

"I thought you didn't see me," I murmured.

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"Of course I saw you. I came on purpose."

"But how did you know?"

"Lady Waterson told me she had asked you to call. And I guessed you would come to-day to tell her about your situation." He flicked a bit of dust from his shiny patent boot. "You looked worried as I came in."

"That man wanted to know if I thought Ibsen depressing or stimulating. I have only read *The Master Builder* and I thought it simply dull."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I didn't want to depress him. He looked so eager." Mr. Westcott laughed his sudden painful laugh and stopped as abruptly, and the sound of it made me curiously happy and contented. It was so nice knowing somebody in this crowd of strange faces. And I never remembered that I had only met Mr. Westcott for the first time on the previous Tuesday. There are some people you know more intimately in the space of half an hour than others in a lifetime.

"And you begin your work to-morrow? Have you remembered the chop?" And I looked blank. I hadn't remembered the chop.

"But Miss Sparrow will lend me one," I said relieved. "She and her sister are angels."

"Oh!" he said, "who is Miss Sparrow?" And I plunged into an account of the Misses Sparrow and their boarding-house; the wicker chair and the washstand mats; the boarders and Mr. Pidge's appetite. And he listened intently and interestedly to it all, chuckling about the merry-thought shooting off the

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dish, and with a smile of sympathy at the Misses Sparrow not "finding" soap.

"Do you know," I said at the end, "you are one of the best listeners I have ever met. Or are you only polite? Perhaps you are really bored by all this."

"Bored! No. I don't think I am. And if I were the remedy is in my own hands. I could steal away like the newspaper man to get some more tea. Can I get you some more, Miss Hilary?"

"Please," I said, "and two lumps of sugar." And while he went for it I studied him carefully. His tread was deliberate and heavy, and his movements were slow and self-possessed. There might be a crowd, but amongst it he remained calm and unruffled. He wanted tea and he was going to get it even if a pot had to be specially brewed for him. The cut of his clothes was immaculate and his black hair was well brushed and faultlessly parted. He was in no way a dandy and was yet the best dressed man in the room. There was a quiet strength about him which brought one a curious sense of security. Had a fire broken out and there was no way of escape one felt Mr. Westcott would somehow make one. "Two lumps," I heard him say very distinctly, and I smiled. As he threaded his way carefully through the room I noticed that the tired look had almost left his face and that he was younger than I had imagined. How old was he? Forty, fifty?

"Yes," he said, handing me the tea. "You want to know something?"

"Oh, no," I returned, fibbing.

"But you do. Yours is a tell-tale countenance, Miss Hilary. Out with it. I will answer it if I can."

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"I was wondering—but you will think me very rude—how old you were."

He gave me a slight stare. "That is curious," he said, "but I was thinking of my age as I crossed the room. You look so young and—you have the gift of making those who are with you feel young. I am old, Miss Hilary, I am thirty-nine."

"Is that all?" I said. "I am twenty-two. I—I thought you were much more than that, at least when you are grave. But when you smile you look almost young."

"Thank you," he smiled now, the slow-coming, strange smile which was so charming through its rarity. "There isn't much in life to smile about as a rule. Don't you agree with me? Or perhaps you find it easier to laugh than to cry. I expect your life has been a very sheltered one?"

"Oh, *very*."

"You don't sound as though you had enjoyed it."

"Should you enjoy being told when you were to go to bed?"

"I don't think I should mind, if the hour fixed were a reasonable one," he said whimsically.

"Ten o'clock, with mother sitting at the edge of a chair with a bunch of keys in her hand, staring at the clock and saying 'Come, Antony.'"

"Is Antony your father?"

I nodded. "And is a perfect dear. And very clever in things that are not useful. He has never been able to make any money, and it has been most fortunate for us that grandfather left him some. We always have a struggle to make all ends meet,

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and never by any chance have a shoulder of mutton. You see, legs are more economical."

"Really!" he said. "Should you mind holding my cup for a moment, because I feel I am going to laugh hard, Miss Hilary."

"It hurts you?"

"What?"

"To laugh. It always looks as though it were giving you a pain."

Lady Waterson crossed the room and enquired what was the joke. "I have not seen you laugh so much for years, Owen," she remarked pleasantly. He rose and offered her his chair. "Thank you," she said, sitting down. "I *do* want to have a little chat with Miss Forrest. Will you go and entertain Mrs. Aveling?"

He murmured something polite, but did not move. She looked at him enquiringly. "I am not very fond of Mrs. Aveling," he said a little bluntly; "anybody else, Lady Waterson?"

"Well, there's Miss Flavelle, she's sitting alone. And I can't understand you. Mrs. Aveling is so beautiful." He remained unmoved and strolled away.

"He is not a society man," remarked Lady Waterson. "I was surprised to see him this afternoon; it is months since he called. He devotes most of his spare time to his mother, who is an invalid. How did you get on with him the other day? He was kind?"

"Yes, indeed. And through him I have met with a situation." And I proceeded to tell Lady Waterson of my engagement with Dr. Peignton. She congratulated me warmly and I thanked her for her kind letter and introduction to Mr. Head. "I can't

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think why you were so good to a stranger," I finished, and Mr. Westcott who had returned and was standing near to us said: "You will cease to wonder when you have known Lady Waterson a little longer, Miss Forrest. She befriends everybody." A smile flickered across her sweet face, as she shook her head, and went away to say good-bye to a departing guest.

"I too, must go," I said, "it's getting late," and Mr. Westcott left the room with me and followed me down the stairs and out of the house. "Our way will be the same, I think, Miss Forrest; may I accompany you?"

"Thank you; and oh, the river, Mr. Westcott!" I cried.

"Yes, it looks lovely even in this half light, nothing can spoil the view from here. You like the river, Miss Hilary?"

"I don't know it, but I am sure I should. I love water, moving water better than anything in the view line. Mountains are glorious, trees are soothing, but water, little streams dancing and singing through green meadows, splashing over cool grey rocks, murmuring through quiet valleys, never quiet, never still; that is what appeals to me. Mountains might become monotonous, but never water, it's so restless."

"I know," he said quietly. "I understand. Some day you will let me show you the river. I should like to very much. 'There is a reach between Pangbourne and Goring, and a backwater at Wargrave, indescribably lovely, and some people shouldn't be allowed to go there, it is desecration. The river is not for them; they cannot enter into its spirit, they understand not its varying moods. A motor car, a golf

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ball are tangible things that can be made to *go*, to answer to your bidding, but the spirit of the river must woo you; and sometimes she is gladsome and smiling, and then *you* must be gladsome; and sometimes she frowns and is sorrowful, and your tears must fall with hers. People who only play games do not understand; a river to them means rowing, swimming, nothing else. But *you* understand, don't you, Miss Hilary?"

"Yes," I replied. "I understand. I was born near a river; close to its banks. Miranda, my sister, tells me that I say my prayers to it. My bedroom window looks on to a little weir, and when the leaves have fallen from an immense copper beech tree which lives near the house, I can see a tiny waterfall as well, only a white thread of glistening water gushing from a rock, but when the sun shines upon it, and icicles fringe its source in the frosty days of winter, one can imagine that the fairies had been at work."

"Yes, and——"

"Oh, that is all," I said awkwardly. "Our little unimportant stream cannot interest one who doesn't know it."

"I shall know it, some day," he said, unexpectedly. "And I am very interested in all you say."

And I was glad that we arrived at the station at this juncture, for my tongue refused to move in reply. Later, when I mentioned this to Miranda, she expressed such unbounded astonishment at so extraordinary a phenomenon that I became quite irritable with her.

"Have you your ticket?" he enquired. And when he handed me into a first-class carriage I still felt

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unequal to mentioning that my ticket was third. Why should he be interested in all that interested me? He was being polite. He would say the same thing to anybody. But no—I glanced at the grave face opposite to me—he wouldn't. He was not that sort. He was interested in me for some unaccountable reason and my heart gave a little throb of pleasure. He was middle-aged, he was famous, he was rich, and yet he had gone down to Richmond, he said, hoping to meet me. I smoothed out my skirt with a pat of my hand. No one in Ridgemoor had ever appeared to find my conversation in the very smallest degree worth attention. When Miranda was present I shrank into a back seat, when she was dressed for the fray nobody glanced at me.

"You would admire my sister, Miranda," I said, suddenly voicing my thought, and hoping he would contradict me.

"Indeed! What is she like?"

"She is lovely, just like a garden rose."

"I prefer the wild rose variety, just opening and swayed by every passing wind."

"Something unstable?"

"Dear me, no. Something impressionable."

"I don't like that variety. Too bread-and-butter."

"Is it possible to find such a thing in these days?" he asked comically. "Young girls as a rule alarm me terribly. They are so clever and old. I can find nothing to say to their ladyships. Sometimes they condescend to talk to me, and I hope I look as grateful as I feel."

A VISIT TO RICHMOND

"Or as you don't," I suggested, and he wondered what I could mean.

We fell to talking of books, and I discovered I had read distressingly little, but we agreed upon liking Mark Twain and Henry Harland and Pett Ridge quite a good bit more than many writers. "Writers who can make us almost smile at the tragedies of life are what we want," pronounced Mr. Westcott, "because there is so much tragedy."

"You see it in your profession."

"Why, pain is the greatest of all tragedies," he said with knitted brow. "A criminal till he is found out has many happy moments; a man in constant agony has none, it is physically impossible. 'And there shall be no more pain,' is the hope that many a sufferer hangs on to; oblivion even would be welcomed."

We were outside the station now and were walking along the Marylebone Road.

"You have seen much pain?"

"A devilish lot," he cried in a half strangled voice. "Pardon the word, but that can hardly express it. Pain and disease and death have jogged my elbow for many a long year. And you ask me if it hurts me to smile. It does through disuse. And I am grateful to you for oiling the machinery a little. I went down to Richmond, Miss Hilary, for a little more oiling and—I got it. I am walking with you to Nottingham Place without asking your permission because I am greedy. And your mother wanted to call you Martha. Great Scott!" And I laughed at him because I couldn't help it.

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"Good-bye," I said when we reached the Misses Sparrow's door.

"Good-night, you mean," he said, in comical dismay. "Wimpole Street is quite close to Nottingham Place."

"Oh, of course it is," I murmured rather foolishly. "Quite close." And Kate opened the door and let me in.

CHAPTER XV

I BEGIN MY WORK

I WAS up betimes on the following morning, eager to begin the day's work, too excited to sleep. I was about to join the great community of wage earners. I should cease to be a useless drone. I should be a self-supporting bread winner. Self-supporting—almost. When I was dressed I opened my purse. Father's sovereign and a shilling were wrapped in tissue paper, ready for my first week's board. I had four and sixpence besides for *everything*. I must walk to and from Grosvenor Square; the walk would do me good. I must wash my own stockings and ties. I must economise in stamps. Supposing grandmother—? But I didn't stop to suppose. I flew down the staircase to the dining-room for my letters. There were three lying by my plate. Breakfast was not quite ready and I carried them off to the drawing-room. They were from grandmother, mother and Miranda. I opened grandmother's first. It was brief and to the point: "So you have got your situation in the fortnight and I suppose you are feeling very pleased with yourself. You appear to have done plenty of badgering and no wonder some poor man has been deluded into taking you. The antimacassar at the back of your mother's chair is in a moist and unpleasant condition through her weeping into it.

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She says she doesn't know how you come to be her child and I tell her if *she* doesn't know nobody else does. I enclose a cheque for £5. Let me know when you want some more. And don't fuss about repaying it. Take your time. Pride is an attribute some people get so puffed up about and I can't imagine why.—Your affectionate GRANDMOTHER.

“Don't let this dentist man kiss you.”

“As though I should,” I shouted indignantly, and Mr. Inglis, who had popped his head into the room, popped it out with extreme rapidity.

Mother said: “Your father and sisters unite with me in congratulating you upon obtaining the employment you desire. You are aware of my real views upon the subject, so it is useless to repeat them. A day will probably come when you will be glad to return to your own comfortable home. The garden is beginning to look very nice and the crocuses are unusually fine. It is some comfort to me to know that your future employer is elderly and fatherly and his views upon the subject of lunch are most sound.

“Your decision to reside at a boarding-house has troubled me greatly. Residence with a quiet, superior family anxious to augment their income would have been far more desirable and appropriate. However, as you have taken matters into your own hands I am glad to learn that the Misses Sparrow are refined and amiable. Miranda is sending you a few lines, so I will conclude with our united love.”

The gong sounded and I reserved Miranda's letter till later. It would never do to be unpunctual on my first morning at Dr. Peignton's.

I BEGIN MY WORK

If the dinner on Saturday night had been quiet the breakfast was funereal. The black frock-coated men snatched their breakfast with their eyes on their watches. Only Mr. Pidge, through being a bank clerk, had time for a really extensive meal. Porridge, kippers, bacon and eggs, marmalade, went down by easy stages. Fried eggs slipped down his throat like oysters, and he was on his sixth piece of bread when I left the room.

The Misses Sparrow lent me a chop, remarking that Dr. Peignton was most sensible, and I arrived at Grosvenor Square punctual, fresh and wind-blown. March was going out like a lion and the day was wild and exhilarating.

I greeted Bywater with a smile. He was a man with a somewhat depressed countenance and mild brown eyes, and seemed to require cheering up. It proved that it was not the day, nor his work, nor his master, that had given him a fit of the blues, but his wife, who cleaned up for Dr. Peignton and made the fires. She was ailing and was always ailing. Nothing serious—headaches one day, backache the next, rheumatism the third. Cups of tea had to be taken up to bed to her, cups of tea made at all sorts of awkward moments. He wished a penny-in-the-slot cup of tea machine could be invented. He was not grumbling, he was fond of his wife, she was a bright, clever little woman, but he wished the Lord had made her a little stronger. It would have been quite as easy to create a woman not subject to headaches as with. Headaches were no use to anybody, they were not even worthy of a doctor or medicine; and while she

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was having headaches he was making fires, and the doctor *that* punctual in arriving—

“Why, doesn’t he live here?” I interrupted, while I removed my hat and jacket and straightened my hair at a mirror over the mantelpiece. And Bywater said that he didn’t. He just had rooms on the ground floor, and the other part was let off to another dentist, and upstairs to a doctor. “That is the way most of these big doctors and dentists do,” he explained. “The rents are something fearful, and then some of them lives away in the country. Dr. Peignton lives down Beckenham way and has a carriage and pair and wife and six children; but he’ll be here in a minute, miss, so I must go. And I hope you’ll be comfortable and settle down with us, miss. Since Miss Peignton got married his papers and books have been in a horful confusion. Oh, is this the chop for your lunch? Very nice bit of meat, off the loin, miss. If you want anything just touch the bell.”

As Bywater went out Dr. Peignton came in. He looked nipped by the North wind and a trifle blue, and stood warming himself by the fire for a minute or two while he chatted pleasantly. I was to consider this little room my private sanctum. He and Mr. Brown, his assistant, would come there to dictate letters, give instructions and look through the books; but, if they came upon any other pretext I must regard them as intruders, though he trusted I would not be too exclusive and stand-off. He patted me on the shoulder as he spoke, and I shrank a little. Was it right, I wondered, for a man to pat his secretary? I didn’t want to be prudish, but would mother approve?

“We shall all be as jolly as sand boys together.”

I BEGIN MY WORK

he continued cheerfully, and I acquiesced, though anyone less like my idea of a sand boy than Dr. Peignton I could not conceive. He then explained slowly and carefully my duties and the method of keeping his books. From a shelf he drew a daybook and a ledger, explaining their uses. The latter seemed very important; from the items therein the half-yearly bills were sent out to the various patients. From a casual inspection I gathered Lord Craythorpe's account would be pretty heavy; two gold crowns, two gold fillings, four artificial teeth, etcetera. A Miss Redenshurst would also have cause for depression unless her purse was long. Then Dr. Peignton explained the names of the teeth which answered to the various hieroglyphics jotted down in his own little notebook, and which entries I should have to copy out each evening in the daybook. L.L.M. No. 1 meant first left lower molar. R.U.B. No. 2 stood for second right upper bicuspid. Swiftly Dr. Peignton introduced me to centrals, laterals, canines, wisdoms and the molars and bicuspid mentioned above, till I was quite confused.

"You will soon pick them up, and now for the letters." To some he dictated replies, others were answered by cards of appointment. "These are my patients for to-day. You see I have left a blank space below each name to be filled in with description of treatment. This I shall give you to-night. You will copy the entries into the daybook and write out my list of patients for to-morrow. Now I must go. I am always in the surgery by ten o'clock. If I should require you during the morning I shall ring twice. One ring is for Bywater, two for you."

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"But what should you require me for?" I asked and it struck me that his answer was a little evasive. His lady patients sometimes fainted and cried or became hysterical, and I—might be useful. He disappeared as he spoke and I sat down to the letters. In my very best handwriting with the e's well opened I informed Mrs. FitzSimmons that Dr. Peignton extremely regretted to hear that she was suffering so much from toothache; and as it was impossible for her to come up to town owing to her being confined to bed, if she would drop some oil of cloves on to a piece of cotton wool and insert this in the cavity relief would be obtained. But an early visit to Dr. Peignton was strongly advised, as an abscess might be forming at the root of the tooth.

Mr. Lycett-Hambleton was informed, in reply to his question, that the crowning and bridgework as recommended during consultation on the previous day could be done at a cost of twenty-five guineas.

Miss Winyats was informed that her plate was now ready and if she could make it convenient to call on Thursday morning at 11 o'clock Dr. Peignton would be glad.

About a dozen or so letters similar to samples given were written, and the cards of appointment brought me up to 12 o'clock. I took five minutes' rest and examined my surroundings, which were moderately attractive: an ugly wallpaper—shiny raised carnations on a buff ground; a good-coloured though rather shabby Turkey carpet; a desk with drawers in the front and pigeon holes above; a bookcase containing several works on dentistry, a dictionary, a *Who's Who*, a London directory and a Whittaker's

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Almanac. There would be no time wasted on reading. A marble timepiece and two bronze spill pots stood on the mantel shelf; a few old-fashioned engravings hung on the walls: *With the Stream and Against the Stream*, Oliver Goldsmith and his irate landlady, and Millais's *Huguenots*. I lingered some little time over the last picture, though I knew it well. The expression on the man's face seemed to have taken on a meaning I had never found there before. It was not only tender, but full of that strength which can be very patient and very long-suffering and very heroic. He loved the woman he was leaving, and he loved her enough to leave her, for he had faith in her. He realised that she would ever place duty before affection; and so loving each other with a deathless love they separated, he to the field of battle, she to sit at home and *wait*. And surely hers was the harder part. I wondered was the man killed, or did he return to her covered with honour and glory? Musing thus I turned to the books and entered up molars and bicus-pids till I was weary and hungry. A molar was not a romantic or interesting subject and I was glad when Bywater came in to announce that lunch was served. I followed him to another room and found Dr. Peighton already seated before a dish of veal cutlets and mashed potatoes. My chop lay lonely on a separate dish, which Bywater handed to me with a ceremonious flourish. My employer was kindly and cheerful; he rubbed his small freckled hands together and said we would not wait for Mr. Brown as he was usually a little late. Bywater placed a cutlet in front of the fire to keep hot for him, and then left the room.

We discoursed upon various topics: the weather,

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the state of the roads, the prospect of a fine summer. Dr. Peignton expressed the hope that I should be with him a long time and I said he was very kind. He brought his chair a little nearer to mine and offered me mustard with extreme cordiality. I forbore to mention that chops and mustard didn't go well together, as he evidently wanted to do kind things for me. When Mr. Brown appeared I was relieved and I didn't allow myself to ask why. Dr. Peignton was an amiable, old gentleman with wispy hair and feet encased in gaiters. If he happened to possess an affectionate disposition as well I mustn't worry.

Mr. Brown stood and smoothed his hair that didn't exist, for he was almost immodestly bald. He had a sandy moustache and a mildly surprised eye and expression. Was he surprised at life generally or anything in particular? I wondered, or at Dr. Peignton? He picked up his veal cutlet from the fender and looked just as surprised at that. Then I discovered the reason for this chronic astonishment. It was his eyebrows: they were very curved and very far away from his eyes; in fact, they appeared to have strayed away into bald space and got lost. Dr. Peignton introduced us and Mr. Brown tried to look as pleased at making my acquaintance as was possible with an empty inside and a veal cutlet ahead. I gave a little sigh; lunch every day with two such dull old fogies was not a bright prospect. Dr. Peignton heard me and offered more potatoes.

Said Mr. Brown: "A busy morning, doctor."

Said Dr. Peignton: "A very busy morning."

Said Mr. Brown: "A rough day."

Said Dr. Peignton: "A very rough day."

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Mr. Brown squeezed lemon juice over his cutlet, and spread a serviette round his waist. They both looked at me and endeavoured to draw me into the exciting conversation: "You will get some very strong winds in Ridgemoor?"

"Yes."

"From what quarter chiefly?"

"All quarters."

"Of course Derbyshire is exposed?"

"Very exposed."

"Ah, I thought so." Dr. Peignton seemed impressed with the vastness of his geographical knowledge.

"Is your home anywhere near Matlock?" Mr. Brown was not going to be outdone by Dr. Peignton. The latter knew that Derbyshire was bleak; he, Mr. Brown, knew that it contained Matlock.

"About thirty miles, I should say."

"Pretty country round there—the Peak district." Dr. Peignton spoke carelessly. If any man knew anything about Derbyshire he was the man.

"Sir Walter Scott's great novel was laid there, I believe," observed Mr. Brown, cleaning up the gravy on his plate with a piece of bread.

I felt grateful to them for their efforts, but I glanced at the clock. The luncheon hour was slipping away and I yearned to be in the fresh wind which was booming down the chimney and rattling the doors and windows. I had planned to go to the park and see how the growing things were getting on, if they were hurrying up and covering the bare spaces of Winter with a delicate green garment. And these two elderly gentlemen would discuss Derbyshire.

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"Please may I go?" I asked politely.

"But there's a rice pudding coming."

"I—I didn't bring any."

"It will give me great pleasure if you will share mine—ours."

"Thank you, you are very kind, but I am not very fond of rice pudding."

"Dear me, how unfortunate," they said together; "we have one every day."

"I don't dislike the apron," I said, conceding a little.

"The apron?"

"The top brown part, if it isn't burnt."

"Oh, the skin. You shall have it," said Dr. Peington generously. "The apron! that is a good word, ha! ha!" He moved his chair a little closer, the table was round, and when he was serving the rice pudding I edged away towards Mr. Brown. A plate with a liberal supply of "apron" was handed to me, and the funny side of this luncheon party suddenly struck me and I began to laugh, and I laughed so much that a bit of apron went the wrong way and Dr. Peington was solicitous and moved to heavily patting me on the back.

"A little joke!" he murmured, "a little joke of your own and you must let us share it when you are better. I am glad you are gay, Miss Forrest. We like gay young people, don't we, Mr. Brown?" He punctuated his remarks with pats on my back, though the occasion for them had now passed.

"But you are gay yourself," I remarked, leading him away from the subject of my joke.

He threw out his narrow grey chest: "You have

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observed that. Yes, I am a bit of a gay dog, Miss Forrest, I must confess. I am a boy at heart. A man is only as old as he feels." Mr. Brown coughed into his rice pudding and Dr. Peignton stopped and looked at him. I seized the opportunity to get up and asked to be excused, and this time my employer signified his assent. "And after you have been for your walk, Miss Forrest, I shall be glad if you will go a little errand for me." He went on to say that his daughter had done odds and ends for him in the way of messages, sending off telegrams, shopping, and he hoped I wouldn't object to doing the same, especially as there would be little surgery work at present. I failed to understand what he meant by the last observation, as no reference to surgery work had been made by him when he engaged me; but I let it pass, and I expressed my delight and willingness to do anything he wished in the message line. He thereupon fetched a small parcel which he requested me to leave at one Samuel Topper's, a dental instrument-maker whose business quarters were on the top floor of a building in a street off Sloane Square. The street door would be open and I wasn't to ring, but just walk up the stairs till I came to Mr. Topper's rooms. Seven was the number of the house, there was no reply to the parcel, and I was to take a 'bus at his, Dr. Peignton's expense. I could have wished that he had said "hansom," one of my favourite methods of locomotion, but he didn't.

I enjoyed my walk in the park, and Miranda's letter on one of the benches: "I am not surprised you have met with a situation," she said, "I knew you would make somebody take you. You have always

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Spring-cleaning; four jars of furniture-cream have been prepared from a new recipe; spirits of harts-horn used instead of Castile soap. Mrs. Widdicombe called one day to say that new surplices for the choir were being made by ladies of the congregation, and would we care to join. We were to meet at each other's houses every Wednesday—that day being the freest of "At-Homes," and tea would be provided. Of course mother jumped at it, so you can picture me every Wednesday afternoon with a needle and surplice in my hand and a great desire for you in my heart; for even at church decorations you made us laugh, which was naughty but very pleasant. I enjoy your letters and don't forget to write *every* week.

"Your very loving, MIRANDA."

When a nurse-girl who was also sitting on the bench looked away I raised Miranda's letter to my lips and kissed it.

I found the street and house and open door without any difficulty, and, according to instructions, walked straight up the stairs. On the second landing a woman was scrubbing and a maid in a flyaway cap and smart apron was gossiping with her. They regarded me with, what I thought, most impertinent curiosity, and I requested the woman to move her bucket to enable me to pass. She did so unwillingly while still staring; and checking a desire to enquire if my appearance afforded her pleasure I continued my way up the third flight of stairs. At the top I found myself confronted by five doors, probably they all belonged to the dental instrument-maker, and I opened the first after a light knock and walked in on

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to a young man who was just pushing his head into a clean, white, crackly shirt. "Is that you, Tommy?" he enquired affably in a muffled voice, and before I could bolt backwards he had emerged through the other end of the shirt and was blankly staring at me. With a muttered apology and crimson cheeks I rushed out of the room and down the stairs to the two women, whom I found on tiptoe with necks craned upwards, evidently trying to follow my movements.

"Isn't, doesn't Mr. Toper live upstairs?" I demanded.

"Next door."

"Oh," I panted, "I went into a bedroom . . . a man—"

"It was the footman dressing," said the maid laconically. "This is a private house."

"But the street door was open."

"Yes, we're Spring-cleaning. That's why all the carpets are up."

"I'm awfully sorry."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," said the maid, unbending. "None of the family's at home. I quite see how the mistake happened."

I thanked her and went next door, where I found Mr. Toper and handed him the parcel. The young footman still caused my cheeks to burn. "What a blessing he was half dressed," I thought. "Supposing he had been . . ." I decided to keep this adventure to myself.

The remainder of the afternoon I spent in posting up the ledger from the daybook. There were three weeks' arrears of work. Every patient had to be looked up in an address book for his or her number

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in the ledger. It was unexciting work, but I was singularly happy. On the Saturday I should receive twenty-five shillings earned entirely by myself. It was a delicious moment to look forward to. Our dress allowance at home had been doled out so grudgingly by poor mother with sighing references to "the place swallowing up so much of the money." I looked ahead into the years and saw myself earning £2 or £3 a week, or perhaps even more. I might get on to a newspaper and write critiques and become infallible. Then I should be independent of grandmother's help and in a position to help others. I would rather help than be helped.

Tea was brought in by Bywater at half-past four, and I wondered if this were a free gift. Dr. Peington came in a few minutes later and begged for a cup, and helped himself to bread and butter and a Marie biscuit. I enquired if Mr. Brown didn't take any, and looking a little sheepish he replied they generally had it in the dining-room, but to-day he thought it would be pleasanter to have it with me, and he ventured to think I wouldn't object. He laughed as he spoke, and I looked at this little man critically, at his grey beard which was thin and patchy, at his freckled hairy hands, at his small buttoned boots and tan gaiters. "Verily," I thought, "this little man imagines himself to be irresistible; and I daren't let him know I think quite the contrary, for I value my post." He was regarding me expectantly and I smiled a little vacuously. He appeared satisfied with this and fell to relating stories and anecdotes for my edification, and I had nothing to do but nod my head and look interested. After a

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while he examined my work, and expressed himself as entirely satisfied, and then suddenly, to my great amazement, he asked, certainly with some hesitation, if I possessed a black blouse or bodice.

"A black blouse!" I repeated.

"Yes," he said, nervously blowing his nose. "The one you are wearing is very pretty, suits you first-rate, my dear, but I prefer a black one for—for business."

"But I'm not a shop-girl or a housemaid," I ventured to protest.

"No, no, of course you are not. But, you see, your services may be required in the surgery sometimes; and an entire black costume would be more professional. That pink blouse looks too frivolous and might distract the patients' attention. You see, men are but human and are always bowled over by a pretty face," he concluded with an air of sprightly waggishness, and he made as though he would again pat me, but I evaded him by stooping to tie my shoe lace.

"May I ask in what capacity I am likely to be required in the surgery?" I spoke coldly, but I was frightfully nervous.

"To assist Mr. Brown with the difficult gold fillings."

"But——"

"The work is quite easy, a child could do it. But you will see to-morrow."

My first impulse was to vehemently point out that in engaging me he had not alluded to my assistance being required in this direction, but I remembered my pecuniary position and the hunt I had had for work.

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Secretaryships apparently were few and far between. I could not afford to throw away such a situation in a minute. Dr. Peignton had not been straight or above-board. The prospect of helping to fill the teeth of a lot of strangers was extremely distasteful. But what was I to do? If I left at the end of a week everybody would laugh. Some of them would split their sides. Dr. Peignton was looking at me anxiously, nervously; he shuffled his gaitered feet, he picked crumbs up from the tablecloth, he poked the fire, he wiped his mouth.

"Very well," I said at length. "And I think it is time to go, it is half-past five. If you will excuse me I will put on my things."

He said "Good-night," and went out of the room with a relieved air, and a few minutes later I left the house. Deep in thought I walked up Bond Street. The idea of being made to wear a black blouse roused all my fighting qualities. I would fill teeth, but I should dress as I pleased. No mention had been made of a uniform when he engaged me. I might be a postman, or tram conductor, or a young lady at Whiteley's. His tone of good-humoured, friendly insolence as he said no man could resist a pretty face brought the blood surging to my cheeks. I—an Alardyce on my mother's side, with good old blood in my veins—to be treated as though I were a bargirl by a common little man who was addicted to patting. Like a whirlwind I turned into Oxford Street and nearly collided with Juanita and Tony.

"Whatever's the matter?" Juanita enquired, with uplifted brows.

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"He wants me to wear a black blouse and fill teeth."

"Dear me! What tragedy!"

"I wasn't engaged to fill teeth."

"I certainly shouldn't like you to fill mine. I don't think you could do it, either."

"And he's patted me twice."

Tony distinctly laughed. I heard him, but he pretended he was only coughing.

"That was a little familiar of him," said Juanita, "but perhaps he did it like a father."

"No," I replied, slowly, "I don't think so; but, of course, I am not sure."

"You must be very dignified and firm with him," said she; "old and elderly men are frequently troublesome in that way; they take advantage of their grey hairs."

"Where were you going?" I asked her.

"To call for you. We were anxious to know how your first day had gone off. We thought there might be fireworks."

"There were no fireworks, but I saw a footman changing his shirt." I had forgotten Tony, and was vexed when he spluttered loudly.

"My dear Hilary," cried Juanita, "what *are* you saying? We'll walk with you to Nottingham Place."

I squeezed her arm and told her that I had been feeling so—well, not exactly homesick, but Miranda-sick, and she turned up like an angel.

"An angel in a tweed ulster. We are going to the theatre to-night, to the upper circle. It's a Bernard Shaw play."

"How perfectly delightful!" I sighed.

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"Come, too," invited Tony.

"No, thanks, I——" I glanced at Juanita.

"We are not going alone," she said, composedly. "Dorothea is joining us at the Florence for dinner." I understood why Tony had given me the invitation. There was an awkward number for conversation at a theatre.

"We shall be delighted if you will join us, and then you can tell us about the footman," he urged.

"Tony has had a windfall to-day," said Juanita. "An aunt has died and left him two or three thousand. We should have taken stalls or a box, had we known earlier."

He looked at me a trifle beseechingly; and unselfishly I went. And, in the novel delight of dinner at a restaurant, and "You Never Can Tell," and watching a Shaw audience, with an occasional covert peep at the two talking so earnestly behind their programmes, I forgot my little worry, and left the theatre serenely happy. Dorothea, on parting, gave me some sage advice: "Don't refuse to go into the surgery," she admonished, "but stick to the pink blouse. Your firmness will annoy him, but he'll respect you. He was evidently very keen on you, as he stooped to getting you there under false pretences. But beggars can't be choosers, though they may at least have a say about the rags in which they array themselves. And—don't let him pat you."

"Thank you, Dorothea, for your sympathy," I returned; "and it was unnecessary to refer to the last. After this evening there will be no more patting, I can assure you. I would sooner be slapped."

CHAPTER XVI

DOINGS AT GROSVENOR SQUARE AND A CHAT WITH MR. WESTCOTT

ACTING upon Dorothea's advice I continued to wear the pink silk blouse with the addition of a frivolous bit of ribbon of the same colour round my neck. I agreed with her in thinking that to make a firm stand at the beginning was the wisest course or I might be scrubbing floors before a month had elapsed.

Miss Bobbie confided to me in a whisper during breakfast that pink was one of her favourite colours, and I didn't look a bit like a secretary; and that it was frightfully clever of me to be one, and she couldn't think how I managed it. She added that they were expecting another lady worker, an Irish widow who had a hat shop in Conduit Street; and two more gentlemen, both *English*. The last word she pronounced with the pride of one who counts the British-made article the finest in the world. Mr. De Fonblanque, the Frenchman, was late, and she whispered this across his empty chair. She went on to say that she had taken the liberty of wrapping me up a piece of steak for my lunch, as the butcher had sent such an enormous amount she feared meat-flies might descend upon it before it was finished. Mr. De Fonblanque came in at that moment, and I only had time to cast her a grateful glance.

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I was of the opinion then, and I have never had reason to alter it, that the great Creator, in manufacturing the Misses Sparrow, used a special brand of clay that was denied to ordinary mortals. A clay that was kneaded into a wonderful tenderness, simplicity and charity, and which, when tried by the fire, shone brighter and better, and so producing two perfect little English gentlewomen. To know them was not only to love them, but to respect them. Their fame as boarding-house proprietresses had already got abroad among the great army of men and women workers in London who were seeking for a home *like* home. And they were besieged with enquiries till the house was full to overflowing.

"Won't you send Pidge and me away?" I cried one day. "I don't know what he pays you, but you could get a lot more for our two rooms."

And, ignoring my suggestion, they said they were coining money; it almost alarmed them. And had I noticed how much better Mr. Pidge's pimp—they meant eruption—was? and they were so glad, as it showed his food was suiting him. And I could only kiss Miss Susie's hand, and murmur something unintelligible and foolish.

The following two or three days at Dr. Peignton's passed very much like the first. I wrote letters, posted up the books, went messages, lunched with, and tried to be pleasant and affable with, the two elderly gentlemen, listened to Bywater airing his grievances about his wife's headaches and chronic demand for cups of tea, and arranged the flowers for the waiting-room and surgery.

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No reference was made to my pink blouse. Dr. Peignton had given me a quick, searching glance as he entered my room on the morning following his request for a black attire; but he made no comment, and I breathed more freely. Perhaps he imagined my wardrobe was void of a black bodice and I had put one in hand at my dressmaker's. To make up for my insubordination I worked all the more diligently. The letters, the daybook, the ledger, the cards of appointment, the receipts for belated Christmas accounts, were without flaw, or so I fondly imagined. I had had no difficulty in transcribing my shorthand notes; Dr. Peignton dictated slowly and accurately. I had time to stick in all my "of's" and "to's" and "dots" which had caused me some anxiety. I was interested and happy in my work, and quite interested in some of the patients. Lord Craythorpe, from his letters, was a jocular man with an uncommonly bad set of teeth, which, for some reason, presumably humorous, he referred to as "jumpers." "My top big 'jumper' is giving me the deuce," he would write. "I am coming in on Tuesday, and none of your infernal drilling, and boring, and rubber-dams, and saliva-ejectors—out the chap comes. You understand that." I felt rather drawn towards Lord Craythorpe. Then, I was full of sympathy for a poor Miss Minton, whose gums were receding from her teeth through rheumatism, leaving the exposed surface a prey to decay and sudden dissolution. They would all have to come out, said Dr. Peignton, and poor Miss Minton disliked the idea of false teeth with a very great intensity. Rheumatism in joints one could countenance, but

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rheumatism in gums was preposterous! Dr. Peington expressed himself as amused and pleased at my interest in his patients, and a day would come—a pause—when he hoped I should personally make their acquaintance. And, naturally, I changed the subject with remarkable haste.

An afternoon came when, pausing from my work for a little rest—for one's hand soon cramps with continuous writing—I strolled to the hearth to warm my feet, and unconsciously fell to smoothing my hair in front of the mirror over the mantel-shelf. I was thinking of Miranda, of home, of the daffodils, which so soon would be starring the uncut stretch of grass by the river; and as I thought I pulled out my hair at the sides, tucked away a tangled bit from my forehead, refixed a hairpin. And, without my hearing him, Dr. Peington entered the room, and stood at my side, placing a hand on my shoulder.

"Having a little prink, and admiring your charming face, eh?" he asked, with a foolish little giggle. And, covered with a wave of shame and annoyance at having been so discovered, I sat down quickly, without making any reply.

He stood and regarded me with an amused air. "You were admiring yourself, weren't you?"

"No, I was not," I replied, with a little heat.

"Nothing to be ashamed of if you were. It's only natural. You're a very pretty girl, and you know it, and when the colour rushes into your cheeks—Gad! you're a beauty!"

I took not the faintest notice of him, and resumed my writing, but my heart was pounding away furiously . . . dreading I knew not what.

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myself. Had mother frightened me unduly? He was so calm now, so practical, so grey, so very elderly, that surely I had been a fool! "You see"—he was telling me—"this note was brought by hand. The writer of it, Mrs. Lindsey, of Cavendish Square, is in great pain; and I want you to take the reply I am now going to dictate to her at once."

And gladly I went. The fresh air cooled my heated cheeks, the fresh air blew from my senses the touch of Dr. Peignton's little hairy hand. The crowds of well-dressed, cheery, chatting humanity in Bond Street stimulated and delighted me. The women were so well-groomed and well-coiffured, and had such fresh, beautiful complexions; and the men were so tall and broad-shouldered, and bronzed through their motoring, and golfing, and various athletics. Surely the love of playing games was bringing a saner, healthier, happier race, I told myself with profound wisdom as I turned into Vere Street, forgetting that Juanita had expressed such an opinion on some former occasion. If only Dr. Peignton golfed, or fished, or motored, or engaged himself in some occupation suitable for a gentleman of his years, he wouldn't want to pat and pay compliments to girls, I thought.

I delivered the note and package to Mrs. Lindsey's butler, and, instead of retracing my steps Grosvenor Square way, I stood thinking how pleasant it would be, as I was so near to Wimpole Street, if I could meet Mr. Owen Westcott. I made no secret to myself that I had taken a great liking to Mr. Owen Westcott. Not because he was specially handsome, or tall, or clever, or good, or kind, but because he

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always remembered that mother had wished me to be called Martha, he had reminded me about the chop, he had recollected that Lady Waterson had asked me to call upon her. He had flattered my vanity, Juanita said, with her disarming lazy smile, when I mentioned this later on; and a woman would always prefer the man who recollected the frocks she wore to the man who only remembered her aphorisms.

Wimpole Street was not strikingly handsome, but it was clean, and its houses had nicely polished handles and bells and brasses; and to take a little walk along it would be rather pleasant this bright, Springy afternoon. But I had not proceeded a hundred yards in its direction when conscience gave me an unexpected and disagreeable little prick. I was wasting my employer's time. He was not paying me twenty-five shillings a week, with potatoes, milk pudding, and afternoon tea thrown in, to take walks along Wimpole Street. I wheeled round and nearly collided with a stout old lady who crossly told me to look where I was going. Motor-cars were bad enough—I didn't wait to hear any more after I had made a suitable apology, but set off at a sharp pace.

How often is virtue rewarded? "Never," I can hear the pessimists grumble. But it was, in my own case, that very afternoon. I was just turning out of Cavendish Square when I heard my name pronounced "Miss Hilary"; only one person in London called me that, and of course it was Mr. Westcott. His head was half out of the window of a brougham which drew up sharply at the side of the curb, and he stepped out on to the pavement.

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"What a piece of luck!" he said, shaking hands. "Where are you going?"

I told him back to Dr. Peignton's.

"I might drive you," he said, considering, "but no, walking will be pleasanter and longer." He dismissed his carriage and, turning, walked with me as though it were the most every-day occurrence in the world.

"I am anxious to hear all about your work. I feel partly responsible, you know; and I do so hope you are comfortable and happy." And I vowed, at that moment, that if Dr. Peignton assaulted me with a flat-iron I would keep it from Mr. Westcott. He looked at me with such anxious eyes and his face was so tired that I felt I would give a great deal to be able to bring the slow, difficult smile to his lips and the corners of his eyes once more. And I succeeded beyond my wildest hopes. He had smiled twice when we turned from Oxford Street into Bond Street, and by the time we had reached Grosvenor Square he had laughed outright. He said: "Miss Hilary, you are the fortunate possessor of a most desirable quality; you can laugh at yourself as well as at others. Things won't go much amiss with you as long as you are able to do that. The people who take themselves seriously are the people who have the roughest time of it in this world. Unselfconscious people are invariably happy. But—I'm prosing."

"No," I contradicted, "it's awfully interesting. You make me see everything in a different light. I don't know how you and my Cousin Juanita know so much."

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"Perhaps we are thinking and observing while you are doing."

"Yes," I agreed, "I can never manage to think for long. I arrange, when I go to bed, to have a beautiful long communing with myself. I arrange my data into divisions, and I'm not through the first before I am fast asleep; and then there's no time in the day."

"But you had plenty of time at Ridgemoor?"

"There was nothing to think about there. But, please go on with what you were saying. What about selfconscious people?"

"Oh, they have a terribly rough time of it. They are generally worrying about what somebody else thinks of them, or their house, or their clothes, or their actions. They discover slights which were never intended; they manufacture grievances out of nothing at all; they age prematurely, and when they die everybody is glad."

"I know somebody like that at home," I laughed. "A Mrs. Pratt, a widow."

"Such women are always widows," he pronounced, gravely, "which is one of the rare bits of luck a kindly and sympathetic Providence bestows upon man."

We were standing outside Dr. Peignton's door, and regretfully I said I must go back to my work. "It would be nice if you could come and have tea with me," I told him. "There is always enough for two, and Dr. Peignton usually joins me."

"Oh, does he?" he said, quite sharply. "And he is decent to you?" He looked at me searchingly.

"Have I not told you of my monopoly of the

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milk-pudding apron which he smilingly permits?" I replied, evasively, as I went into the house. Bywater, for an infinitesimal space of time, looked at me and looked at Mr. Westcott as he raised his hat and turned away, a peculiar look, full of everything and at the same time of nothing—nothing that I could take exception to, for Bywater was a very respectful servant and grateful to me for listening to his stories of his wife's headaches. But the look worried me for the remainder of the afternoon, and only disappeared when I sat down in the bright, comfortable drawing-room at Nottingham Place for a before-dinner chat with the Misses Sparrow.

The Misses Sparrow were full of a mild excitement. The young Irish widow had arrived and had already succeeded in making Mr. Inglis give utterance to three consecutive sentences. "Wasn't it clever of her?" they enquired; they had feared that if I had failed, nobody would be successful.

"I never tried," I replied, bluntly. "He heard my unfortunate remark on the night I arrived, and he seems such an intensely selfconscious person I thought it best to let him alone."

"But, my dear, he is only painfully shy," said Miss Bobbie. "He gave you a lovely smile that night at dinner; I happened to see him, and it was so wistful. I am sure he is lonely. He doesn't seem to wish to mix up with the foreign gentlemen."

"There are two Englishmen: Mr. Cornish, the stockbroker, and old Mr. Marple."

"Mr. Cornish is a little rough for—for Mr. Inglis, who is such a gentleman. It isn't poor Mr. Cornish's

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fault, we are sure. Perhaps his mother died young, and he has missed the advantage of home-training. And old Mr. Marple—well, of course he's delicate and inclined naturally to discuss health, and food, and draughts. He talks a great deal about a Dr. Haigh; Mrs. Darbyshire is so patient and sweet in listening to him; and the other afternoon we are almost sure we heard Mr. Inglis say, under his breath: 'Damn Dr. Haigh'—you must excuse our using such a dreadful word, but we want to show you that we think Mr. Inglis is dull and bored—if only he went to business—and would really love to have some one bright and amusing to talk to, but is too shy to begin, and—and we are sure he wouldn't give a moment's thought to what you said the other night, excepting perhaps to think it was very nice of you, so—so——"

"You want me to be friendly with him."

"Yes, my dear," they said, with a relieved sigh.

"But this Irish lady who is so lively can do that, and there are two new men coming, you say."

"Yes." But they still looked doubtful and anxious.

"You want me specially to be nice to him."

"Not specially, but we want all our guests to be on a friendly footing. And—you will forgive us, my dear, but you are so cold and distant to poor Mr. Inglis. When he came into the drawing-room the other night you walked out, when he left the room you returned, and he must have noticed it when he came in later for his paper. He gave you a hurried glance and almost rushed out of the room. Didn't you notice it?"

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"I am sorry," I cried, penitently. "I have been a silly, selfconscious prig, and I will offend no more. What can I do to-night to be nice?"

"Oh, anything, anything. We mustn't dictate to you. Please don't think we have been officious, dear Miss Forrest. And, oh, don't think we were afraid of losing Mr. Inglis. Such a thought never entered our heads; our trouble was that one of our guests wasn't quite at his ease, and we fancied we knew the cause."

"You see . . . my mother told me to be distant and stand-off," I said, a little helplessly. "Though really that wasn't quite the cause. My self-respect——"

"We know, we understand," they cried. "Dear Miss Forrest, do not say any more. We are all going to be so happy now. The gong has rung. Shall we go in to dinner?"

That night when I went to bed I knelt down and said: "Dear Lord, if in thy house of many mansions there should be a part reserved for boarders, let me be their kitchen-maid—a smut with red hands and a coarse apron—eternally condemned to washing up greasy plates and dishes, for that is all I deserve. So important, so selfconscious (in spite of what Mr. Westcott says), so femininely small am I."

And I fell asleep with an easier conscience.

CHAPTER XVII

A WALK WITH A FELLOW-BOARDER

AND so the week passed: work in the day, musical gatherings at night, for I kept my word to my two dear ladies, and that very evening saw me playing the accompaniment to *Excelsior*, which duet was rendered in fine style by Mr. Inglis and Mr. Cornish. Certainly Mr. Inglis hid as much as possible behind Mr. Cornish, and was scarcely heard through the latter's bellowing; still, he was making the effort and for my sake. I had invited him to sing; the words stuck a little at first, but Mr. Cornish helped me out by offering a duet. He knew Inglis could sing (a dig in the ribs), so happily I sat down at the piano and made pretence I loved *Excelsior*, which was my pet aversion of all songs ever sung; and Mr. Cornish was rapturous at his own performance, and the Misses Sparrow beamed, and dear old Mrs. Darbyshire softly hummed the refrain to herself, and Mr. Marple abandoned Dr. Haigh and kindly told us of the songs he had been in the habit of singing when he was young. And this naturally led to the Misses Sparrow diving beneath the musical cabinet and producing a very old and very faded national song-book; and Mr. Marple protestingly gave us *Drink to Me, Only; Salley in Our Alley*, and *The British Grenadiers*. The Ger-

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man gentleman crept away to the billiard-room. Germans, I have observed, do not take kindly to our national music; but Mr. Marple cared not, he soared away to high top notes or burrowed down in the bass with reckless abandonment, and only ceased when Mr. Oliver, one of the new gentlemen, made it clear that *he* wished to sing. Mr. Oliver was a mild-mannered, neat young man with brown, heel-less slippers and a dinner-coat. He sang *The Devout Lover* with much feeling, and sat down amidst great applause. The evening was an undoubted success. The billiard-room, save for the classically-minded German, was empty, and the gentlemen went happy and contented to bed. Mrs. Brady, the Irish widow, confessed to me next day that she had been bored to death. "Preserve me," she cried, "from the man who sings *Tom Bowling* or *The British Grenadiers*. I am never quite sure that I shall escape going into hysterics during the performance. *Tom Bowling* affects me most, I think. Now, *you* seemed quite to enjoy yourself."

"Oh, I am glad you thought so," I said, relieved.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because—I like the Misses Sparrow." Which observation she evidently thought quite beside the point, for she looked at me without comprehension, and picking up a newspaper began to read.

Dr. Peignton's behaviour during the remainder of the week was beyond reproach. There was no hint of further familiarity. He was considerate, polite and business-like. No reference was made to my assistance being required in the surgery. The pink

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blouse was allowed to pass unchallenged. And, with fears lulled to rest, and an earnest resolve to do all that lay in my power to give satisfaction in every department but that of dental assistant, I drew my first week's salary, and with the golden sovereign and five shillings clasped tightly in my hand I returned to Nottingham Place walking upon air. The Misses Sparrow had pressed me to return to lunch, it would be so pleasant to have me; Mr. Marple, Mr. Inglis and Mrs. Darbyshire seemed so depressed in the middle of the day, at least the two latter were depressed, while Mr. Marple lunched off beans and cheese, and talked of Dr. Haigh. I saw through their little deception—they wished to save my lunch money, but I accepted their kindness in the spirit it was given. Some day when I was rich I should do all sorts of things for the Misses Sparrow. I should take them to the theatre, and trips on the river, and drives in the country. Perhaps mother would allow me to have them down on a visit to the Garden House. In the meantime I accepted boiled mutton and caper sauce with gratitude, and endeavoured to improve my acquaintance with Mr. Inglis. This at first was slow work; it is not easy to converse with a man who fastens his eyes upon a water-jug, with an occasional jerky look at you. The jerkiness upsets your equilibrium. You know it only arises from shyness. You are aware that the man is thoroughly nice and clever, and interesting, and a gentleman to his finger-tips, but his jerkiness makes *you* jerky. You upset the salt, and make pellets of your bread, and allow your serviette to slide on to the floor. You say you know he is clever; well, you assume such diffidence must

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conceal something—not roguishness. He doesn't look like a rogue, so it must be genius.

Later on in our acquaintance I found my surmise had been correct. Mr. Inglis *was* clever—a student and a bookworm, and with sufficient genius and modesty to hide his profound knowledge. The world at large doesn't hanker after geniuses; it likes them ignorant and unoriginal, and amiable, and a thoroughly good sort, like itself. Quite right, world! It does make you feel a bit depressed to be with people who are vastly superior to yourself. You want to get a gun and shoot anything that is handy. So Mr. Inglis's shyness and diffidence were his salvation. The foreign element voted him a decent chap, though a bit of a fool, patronised him and explained things about his own country to him. The English contingent beat him at billiards, borrowed his whiskey and made him listen to their latest stories. The Misses Sparrow mothered and respectfully adored him, and Mrs. Brady and I liked him better than any other man in the house.

"He's so clean," I said. "The sort of man who tubs and changes his linen twice a day."

She laughed gaily. We were in the country. She had invited me to join her on a walking excursion. "I always walk on Saturday afternoons," she had explained. "I am inclined to get stout. I sit so much during the week, and I would rather be dead than fat."

I accepted her invitation with alacrity, and we trained it down to Richmond, walked through the park to Kingston, and on by the river to Hampton Court.

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Mrs. Brady was handsome and typically Irish: dark hair, blue eyes, a fresh complexion, and a mouth—later on I overheard the Frenchman say: “*Ah, quelle bouche!*” and I knew that his hand was on his heart. And I can’t think of any better way of describing Mrs. Brady’s mouth. She was gay, with a ringing laugh which was very infectious; dressed well and walked well, with her head in the air and shoulders squared.

“It is heavenly!” I ejaculated, as we struck out along the smooth red roads of the park, with a soft west wind caressing our cheeks.

“I don’t know about that, but it is good for our livers. We shall be eating too much at that place; they feed us too well,” she remarked.

“Have you noticed Pidge?”

“The youth who eats so disgustingly?”

“Yes, he makes me sick. I sit opposite to him. I feel inclined to cry out when he looks round for Kate for a third helping of pudding.”

“You’ll get used to that sort of thing when you’ve been knocking about in boarding-houses as long as I.”

“You have a—hat shop?”

“Yes, and you needn’t be afraid of the word. I am not ashamed of it. I’m quite respectable—one of the O’Neill family of historic renown. I took up business when I was left a widow. Four pounds a week to live on in some out-of-the-way hole, with elderly spinsters never off my doorstep, was not an attractive prospect, so I came to town.”

“But four pounds a week is wealth!” I said. “I am trying to live on less than half.”

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"But you are young. I could have lived on a slice of bread and butter and a radish a day when I was your age. Now I like salmon and green peas, and stalls at the theatre."

"And can you manage stalls out of hats?"

"Yes, I've worked up a good connection, and I'm a splendid saleswoman. A bit of Irish flattery delicately applied and—hey, presto! a lace baby-hat reposes on the head of sixty years, and a Parisian confection nods above Mrs. Weasel-face."

I laughed. "You are rather unkind."

"Nothing of the sort. Every woman who leaves my shop is happier than when she comes in."

"But at the expense of truth."

"Which is the greater virtue: to tell the truth and render people miserable, or to tell some judicious little fibs and make people happy?"

"I don't see that you need do either——"

"Yes you need, and don't argue. It is too delicious a day to waste on idle discussion. We must dally with a subject appropriate to this soft April sunshine. Love, eh?"

"I don't know anything about it," I said.

"Well, you needn't get pink about it," she remarked, drily. "Never asked who was the man. Surely we can discuss the tender emotion in the abstract."

"You can't discuss a subject upon which you are ignorant."

"Dear me, what a literal young person! What does the sphinx talk to you about?"

"I don't know whom you mean."

"The shy man. Mr. Inglis, of course."

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"He doesn't talk to me, he addresses the water-jug."

She laughed her gay, ringing laugh. "That kind is the most dangerous. They pique a woman by their indifference to her charms."

"I am quite sure *I* am not piqued," I returned, sharply. "I am absolutely indifferent as to whether Mr. Inglis likes me or not."

"Oh, he likes you, all right. He likes you very much."

"And the Frenchman likes you. He never removes his eyes from you at dinner," I retorted.

"Well, *I* don't get excited about it. Those beastly foreigners all adore me. I had a proposal from a Greek last month, and another from a Russian a couple of months before. But I am not talking about *my* love affairs."

"Neither are we discussing mine. I am weary of the very word love. I have heard more about the man I am to marry during the last month than I had heard previously in a lifetime."

"Well, don't be so serious about it. It is a better topic of conversation than the weather or politics. Love is most interesting. It is the only thing in a rather dull world that keeps you from bursting into tears or slapping people's faces."

"But I don't want to burst into tears, though I did want to slap somebody's face the other day."

"Whose?" she asked; but I refused to tell her.

"All right! Don't, if you don't want to; but I shouldn't let you be alone in London if I were your mother."

I heaved a deep sigh.

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"What's the matter?"

"I'm only sad about the distressing sameness of people and lack of originality. Nearly every person I have met since I came up to London has told me what he or she would do if they were my mother."

Again she laughed.

"Do you know, I think we shall be very good friends."

I said I hoped so, and why was she so astonished at such a prospect?

"Because I don't like women, as a rule; they bore me."

"You have apparently not considered the possibility of your boring me," I said. And she wondered if anything ever did bore me.

"You're so interested and enthusiastic about every mortal thing. I watched you the other evening. First Mrs. Darbyshire wanted to discuss knitting. You told her all about your mother's knitting—you exaggerated it frightfully. I heard you announce calmly that your mother violently rattled four needles for two or three hours, and a stocking was the result——"

"That was perfectly true," I interrupted.

"I don't believe it. You held Mrs. Darbyshire's wool for her to wind, and five minutes later, with eager attention, you were listening to Mr. Marple's dissertation on uric acid and foods. By easy stages you passed on to Mr. Cornish—boor that he is—and discussed Lancashire, cotton-spinning, the pollution of rivers, and Owen's College. And you finished up with the Misses Sparrow and Zenana mis-

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sionaries. Now, you can't be interested in Zenana missions?"

"But I am," I contradicted. "Anything that affects the welfare of women interests me greatly."

And she said she was too tired to laugh, and as we had reached Kingston what did I think of having tea in the market-place? There was a lovely tea-shop she knew, which had most excellent muffins. She allowed herself hot cakes once a week—a Saturday—as she walked them off before they had had time to fatten her. "It is dreadful, this constant warfare against flesh. Once I was as slim as you. Now I weigh ten stone."

"I wonder," I said, when, rested and refreshed, we took the river way to Hampton Court, "in what way you are so different from the women in Ridgemoor."

"Perhaps they are good?" she suggested.

"Yes, they are good," I returned, doubtfully, "but——"

"That will be it, then," she said, cheerfully. "I'm worldly and wicked. I'd rather wear a becoming hat as I am than be converted in an ugly one."

Of course her sentiment was wrong and immoral, my training told me that, but it was very pleasant and daring.

"Your people are churchy?"

"Yes, but they're good as well—really good."

"My people weren't."

"Mine," I said, "will be shortly eating their bread without butter. Lent is coming in."

"And your father, too?"

"Well, he never knows what he is eating; so mother thinks it is not worth while getting butter just for

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him—they eat jam and syrup, and the butter money goes into a Zenana missionary box. Now you will understand why I am interested in Zenanas.”

“But was compulsion brought to bear upon you with regard to your Lenten observances?”

“Oh no,” I returned, “but one felt such a swine indulging in luxuries when one’s family was living on bread and treacle.”

“I am rather glad my family wasn’t religious,” she mused. “I had such a good time, as it was, at home.”

“But what about another world?” My training again cropped up.

“I feel unequal to dealing with more than one at a time,” she laughed. “Besides, I believe one is judged for one’s sins in this. I am selling hats at the moment, and feeding with foreigners who use tooth-picks, instead of living like a duchess in Park Lane. That is my judgment for not leading a better and more unselfish life when I was younger. I married a man, whom I didn’t love, for his money. He rushed through it and left me a pauper. Serves me right.”

“And—would you do differently, had you your time over again?”

“I don’t know. No, I don’t think I should,” she replied, honestly. “I loved my life, and gaiety, and pretty frocks, and—admiration. I revelled in my very selfishness. I would awake in the morning and snuggle down among the clothes, congratulating myself upon having nothing to do for anybody but myself. No hospitals or slums to visit, like some of my pious friends. No blind people to read to, no bazaars

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to attend. Just the whole long day before me in which to laugh, and sing, and enjoy life."

"And now you seriously believe you are being judged for all that?" I asked.

She nodded. "I do. And I am not puling or whining." And she squared her shoulders and threw back her shapely head.

I fell into thought, and we walked for some distance in silence. The shadows were lengthening, and a delicate blue mist lay across the river, and hovered above the green, spikey reeds which were pushing their way through the Winter brown. A blackbird called low, and sweet, and clear, to his mate; and a thrush broke into sudden throbbing ecstasy. Then a reed-warbler took up the evening hymn of praise, and the still air vibrated with melody. It was all very lovely and peaceful.

"You are very quiet." Mrs. Brady turned and looked at me.

"I was thinking of what you said about selfishness and judgment. One doesn't like to think of judgment on an evening so delicious and Spring-scented as this. One wants always to be happy, and never be scolded for anything."

"You're not selfish, so I shouldn't worry," she returned, lightly. "You gave me the best seat in the railway carriage; you are carrying my fur for me now, because I am hot; you accompanied *Excelsior* the other night."

"But those are only small things," I said, slowly. "I am horribly selfish over everything that is important in life. I left home against my mother's wishes—she cried for days about it—and Miranda

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my sister, misses me dreadfully, she says. And yet I stay away, and mean to stay away for a long while."

"Possibly it was selfish of your mother to wish to keep you at home. I think some women are very self-ish to their children. They are never satisfied unless the whole lot are clustered round, holding their hands. Was there anything for you to do at home?"

I shook my head. "Nothing that mattered. We keep three servants, but we all had to pretend to help."

"And I suppose she was disappointed because you didn't adore cooking, and dusting, and mending? That is where some women are so stupid and short-sighted. A girl may feel that she has it in her to write an epic or create a Venus de Milo, and a wife may feel the same divine spark smouldering within, but the mother and husband come bustling along. 'You mustn't do that,' they cry. 'You must dust the legs of the piano and put a button on my shirt. You must learn to be useful and remain within your natural sphere.' So, with a little sigh, they remove the dust from the piano legs, and stitch on the buttons, and bury the epics within their inmost souls, along with all their other unsatisfied desires."

"How beautifully you put it," I laughed. "But all the same, who is going to look after the house and children while the married woman is engaged upon her epic? I don't *want* her to do housework, but we must try to be fair to the husband."

"A woman who has an epic straying about her insides," said Mrs. Brady, somewhat inelegantly, "can pay a woman who hasn't, sixpence to dust the

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piano legs while she is making a shilling out of her epic (good poetry is valuable), and still have plenty of time over the children. Men have been doing this for centuries. A barrister who receives a hundred-guinea brief attends to the brief, and doesn't waste time in scrubbing his office floor. I know a man who told his wife—a very clever artist—that she was shirking her responsibilities when she suggested engaging a housekeeper. 'But I can be earning a hundred pounds,' she argued, gently, 'while the housekeeper is doing my work for thirty or forty.' And he replied he had never heard of a more unwomanly suggestion. Now, what can you say to a man like that?"

"He wanted his ears boxed, but I don't think there are many such," I replied. "And, of course, there are some who *must* do the menial, the dirty work of the world; there is no getting over that fact."

"Exactly; the people with the fewest brains."

"Not altogether," I disagreed. "Don't you think lack of push, lack of opportunity, as well as lack of brains, often keeps a person sticking to the lowest rung of the ladder?"

"Perhaps," she agreed. "Especially lack of opportunity, which is another name for luck. Luck, after all, is the greatest factor towards success in life."

"My people wouldn't call it luck," I returned.

"They would say it was Providence, the hand of God?" She paused to gather a spray of flowering blackthorn.

I nodded.

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"Well, all I can say is that Providence is beastly rough on some human beings. And they didn't even ask to be born—poor wretches!"

"No, that is very hard; but I think whatever lies before me, I would rather have been born than not born."

"That is because you are under twenty-five, and have a good digestion, and have escaped the dusting of piano legs *pro tem.*," she grumbled.

"And you?" I queried.

"I don't know. If you've never known what it is to live, why, you've never known. And here we are at Hampton Court Station, and I wonder how soon there will be a train to Waterloo."

"The Misses Sparrow said they would keep our dinner hot, if we were late."

"Of course they would. That is just the sort of thing they'll always be doing. I never met anyone like them. You daren't look depressed, for fear they'd offer you something to cheer you: chicken broth, or hot buttered toast, or even a cushion. What wonderful parents or wonderful bringing-up they must have had. They've come of fine stock, I'll be bound."

"That doesn't follow. I have come of fine stock," I volunteered; and she raised her eyebrows whimsically and said *that* was hard to believe.

Later on, when we had arrived at Waterloo and taken a hansom to Nottingham Place, she said she was glad I was staying there. That most of the men were dull, and, though she had lots of friends, it was pleasant to feel that there was some one in the house she could talk to without turning out. "I'll

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trim your hats for you," she cried, in a burst of generosity.

"And what shall I do for you in return?"

"Don't monopolise that Inglis man too much," she said, to my great annoyance; and because I remained silent for the rest of the journey she thought fit to giggle and chuckle as though she had said something very funny.

"I'm only rotting," she whispered, squeezing my arm as the hansom drew up. "I know you are not that sort; and you are also not the sort with whom men fall readily in love."

And I pondered upon the latter part of her remark all the way up the stairs, and all the time I was changing my frock for dinner, and all the time I was eating my dinner; and the more I pondered upon it, the less I liked it. Had she meant it, or was she still rotting?

CHAPTER XVIII

I AM OUT OF WORK

THE end came abruptly. I don't mean my own or any other person's demise, but my reign at Dr. Peignton's. Within a fortnight after entering into my engagement with him I had received my congé, and was once again bombarding people's doors for work. Even now I won't admit it was my own fault. It happened this way: One afternoon I was summoned to the doctor's surgery (I was still wearing the pink blouse) and, avoiding my eye, he told me that he required my assistance. A very large stout man lay back in the dental chair, with his mouth wide open, making queer stertorous sounds. At the first instant I thought he was having an apoplectic fit, and felt very alarmed; but, observing that my employer remained quite unmoved, and on his adjusting a hook-like arrangement and tube which were suspended from the patient's lower jaw to a different position the gurgling sounds altered in character, I realised that this alarming noise was caused by the saliva-ejector.

Dr. Peignton, still avoiding my glance, pointed to a small velvet cushion on the surgical table, upon which rested some bits of gold, handed me a pair of forceps, pried open the man's jaws still further, encircled a tooth in a piece of rubber, pointed to a

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large cavity, directed me to drop a bit of gold into it when he said "now," and proceeded to dry the tooth with cotton wool and much blowing of heated air. "Don't wet the gold with the patient's saliva," he commanded, "and while I am ramming it home with this electrical instrument, you have another piece ready. *Now.*" I set my *own* teeth and picked up a bit of the gold. I would do as I was bidden now, though anger blazed in my eyes and cheeks—I could feel the burn, but later . . . Carefully I was conveying the filling to the tooth when the patient suddenly rolled two eyes round at me, so startling me that I dropped it on to his tongue. He jumped, and Dr. Peignton made a movement of annoyance. "Please be more careful, Miss Forrest," he said, sharply. Then I became nervous. With a trembling hand I picked up another bit of gold, and again deposited it on to the man's tongue. Dr. Peignton muttered something inaudible—something with rather a naughty sound—and straightway a spirit of mischief and perversity entered into me; I saw a way out of my difficulty. I would drop *all* the gold into the patient's mouth. At the sixth piece Dr. Peignton told me I could go, which I did, and sat down in my own room, awaiting the verdict.

He came to me in about twenty minutes. I looked at him a little defiantly; my case was good, and he must be made to understand my position. No expression of "pussy" lingered now in the corners of his mouth; he was an outraged, irate little man. As he met my eyes he cleared his throat. "We must part, Miss Forrest," he said, shortly.

"Yes," I returned.

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"I am sorry, but you will be of no use to me in the surgery, and—and your handwriting is unprofessional." He shifted his gaze.

"You will excuse me asking you, but did you expect professional handwriting and a skilled surgery assistant for twenty-five shillings a week?" I said, calmly. "You saw my writing before engaging me; you also did not refer in any way to my surgical duties."

"Why do you object to them?" he asked, sharply. "The work is not *infra dig*."

"That has nothing to do with the question. When you engage a cook you don't expect her to paint your house, unless you have stipulated that she must perform such a duty."

"I forgot it," he stammered. "And—I thought—I hoped you would like the work."

"If you hoped I would like the work, you couldn't have forgotten it. I don't want to quibble, Dr. Peignton, but I also don't want there to be any misunderstanding on either side. You say you are sending me away on account of my unprofessional handwriting, as well as for another reason. That is not quite the truth. There is only one reason, and that is because I dropped some filling, on purpose I admit, into your patient's mouth."

"It was Lord Craythorpe." His voice was so impressive that I couldn't help laughing.

"Lord Craythorpe's teeth are not a pretty sight. I should have them all out," I said, putting on my hat.

"What are you going to do?"

"Why, leave," I replied.

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"But I don't want you to go in such a hurry. I can take your own time till you have met with other situation. In fact, if only you'd take kin to the surgery"—he was coming nearer to me—might patch up our difference. I—I like you, dear, in spite of your deuced temper and independence. And, by Jove! the way you flush up is—And he suddenly kissed me.

"How dare you?" I shouted, quivering with rage and shame. "How dare you, you—you cad. I ring for Bywater if you touch me again." I rub my cheek furiously. "And—I thought you were a gentleman—yes, a gentleman."

He shrank before my wrath as I stalked toward the door.

"This is what I was warned against. . . . mother, my grandmother——" My voice broke, tears of shame rushed to my eyes.

"I—I am sorry——"

"No, you are not, and, even if you are, it makes no difference. I—I have been humiliated. Good afternoon, Dr. Peignton."

"Your salary," he muttered, nervously. "That will be a week's due."

"My salary!" I blazed. "Do you think I could demean myself by touching a penny of your money after—after such an insult? You don't understand women who are—gentlewomen." And I sailed out the room and down the hall, and only hoped Peignton didn't see me nearly fall over Mrs. Bywater's cat at the front door.

Outside a strong chill wind blew through the square, wrapping my skirts round my ankles, and

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ing my hair across my face, clutching at my hat, taking my breath away; but I welcomed it as something clean, and pure, and wholesome. I held out open arms to it, I turned my face to it. "Spirit of the wind," I cried, softly, "cleanse me of the insult of that horrid little man." Again I rubbed my cheek, and the hot blood went chasing through my veins. They had warned me—grandmother, mother and Dorothea—and I had laughed at them, scorned their advice. I knew how to take care of myself. I could keep any man at arm's length . . . it was only silly girls with whom men took liberties. . . . And now my pride was in the dust; I was deeply humiliated. My very pride and arrogance had lured him on, it had seemed. What was I to do? With hands clasped and head down I was tearing along when some one pronounced my name: "Miss Hilary."

"Oh," I cried, with great gladness. "Mr. Westcott. I might have known I should meet you. You always seem to turn up when I need you, and I need you very badly at this moment. Where were you going? Can you turn and walk with me?"

"Gladly," he said. "I was going to Dr. Peignton's, to leave a note for you. My mother wants you to go and see her to-morrow evening, if you will be so kind. Lady Waterson is coming."

"Thank you," I said. "I shall be very glad, Mr. Westcott. I—feel a bit of an outcast."

"Why, what's the trouble?" he asked, kindly.

"I have left Dr. Peignton's, and——" My lips trembled. He turned his face away, and for a moment or two I swallowed hard.

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"Will you come and have some coffee?" he presently said, gently, "or some tea?"

I nodded my assent, and he led the way into a pretty tea-shop.

"You know," I said, after a while, "I—I am not distressed at leaving Dr. Peignton's—I shall get something else, I hope. I—I can't tell you what has happened; but—I talked so big. I was so grand, so sure of myself; you must have smiled that day when I first called upon you. I was so different from every other girl. So superior, and now my head is in the dust."

"I didn't smile, and it is true you were and are different, and your head won't be in the dust for long. You will forget the insult in time; no, you will never forget it, but its significance will fade. The man has kissed you. . . . " And he suddenly swore beneath his breath. "And I sent you to him, but I didn't know, I couldn't guess. You believe that?"

"Believe it?" I cried. "I believe it as surely as the sun will rise to-morrow. How could you know? And . . . possibly it was my own fault. I was off my guard; I was in a temper; he had sent for me to the surgery to help him to fill a patient's tooth, and I was furious at being asked to do such work. He had not mentioned it when he engaged me; and I dropped the gold filling—six pieces—deliberately into the patient's mouth—it was Lord Craythorpe, a hideous fat man—and Dr. Peignton was very angry, and——" I stopped, for Mr. Owen Westcott suddenly laughed, and I could hardly believe it.

"Forgive me," he said, apologetically. "I couldn't

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help it. I—I know Lord Craythorpe, and he *is* an ugly devil. Your face makes me smile. You—will remember I always smile when I am with you. And, believe me, I *do* sympathise with you. Dr. Peignton should have mentioned every duty. Perhaps he thought you wouldn't mind; and, by the way, why *did* you mind?"

"Mind!" I protested. "Wouldn't you have minded?"

"No, I don't think so. Much more interesting work than keeping books. But don't think I am criticising your action in the matter; everybody looks at things from a different point of view. And—of—course, after what happened later, you were bound to leave . . . the cad. I'd like to have a word with him." He went a dark red and broke a biscuit to powder.

"And now?" he asked.

"Now I must begin right away to look for another job." And I rose.

"But not to-day." He looked at his watch. "It is already five o'clock. What's the desperate hurry?"

"I can't remain in London without work."

"Why not?"

"I've no money," I replied, bluntly.

"But—you won't go home?"

"Nothing would induce me. I have one introduction left: a Mr. Head."

"Of *The Last Word*?"

I nodded.

"I believe he'd take you"—he struck the table—"if he saw you. I'm sure he would. You're the very girl for him. You're enthusiastic. He *must* see

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you." He looked at me as though I were contradicting him.

"I want him to," I said, meekly. "He was away when I called upon him before."

Suddenly Mr. Owen Westcott clasped his hands and stared at me a trifle vacantly. "Yes," he murmured, "he *was* the man."

I waited patiently.

"Do you ever read *The Last Word*?"

I said "No."

"Mr. Head is running a new drink cure."

"Oh!" I said, vacantly.

"For intemperance. He is just starting it; his paper last week was full of it. He has advertised for six test cases. There will be a lot of correspondence. He will require extra help."

"And I am to give it," I said, springing up.

"And you are to give it." His face was full of enthusiasm. All the tired lines had vanished, the tired look had gone, and his eyes kindled as a boy's.

"You must call to-morrow," he urged, as we walked up Regent Street, "before the post is filled. And——" He half stopped.

"Yes?"

"Oh, I was going to suggest—I think it would be wise—trifles influence one more than one imagines, and—it is April, too. Mr. Head has the artistic temperament strongly developed; it would delight his colour sense. . . . Yes, I am sure it would be wise." He fell into thought, and stared vacantly at his umbrella.

"I might point out," I said, gently, "that your ob-

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servations have conveyed no meaning to me. It is usual to finish one's sentences."

He started and laughed. "Why, it's your green frock I mean."

"My green frock!" I repeated, in amazement.

He nodded.

"If there were a chair in Regent Street, I should sit down," I observed. "The effort in endeavouring to follow your involved and dark sayings has left me tired."

Again he laughed. "They were quite simple if you only knew it. I want you to wear the green frock and hat you wore on the day I first saw you. Shall I tell you how you looked? I had had a tiring, worrying morning; my patients had been more involved than usual in describing their symptoms to me; neurotic people—poor souls—are given to beating about the bush, when suddenly it seemed to me the spirit of Spring glided laughing into the room. She stood, slight and hesitating in her green garments, dazzled by a strong shaft of sunshine, and I feared, were I to banish the sunshine, I might banish this green sprite; cautiously I lowered a blind and fearfully I looked round; but no, she had not vanished; she was still there, smiling and a little timid. And I have never seen you timid since, Miss Hilary. We became friends right away, didn't we? You told me your story; and, do you know, I was extraordinarily grateful to you for that. It seemed to me that, in telling me your story, you were treating me as an equal—by which I mean a contemporary, one of the elect, one who was still young. You don't

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know what it means to a man to be made to feel young when he knows he is old."

"Ah, but you are not old. You keep speaking of your age as though it were so great," I cried, impetuously. "And to me, now that the tire has gone out of your face, you seem quite young."

"Do you mean that, Miss Hilary?" He stopped abruptly, and stared into my face. "Are you sure you mean that?"

"We—we are blocking the traffic. Let us move on," I murmured, on a sudden strangely nervous.

"But you haven't answered my question."

"Women are always older than men. When they are little girls—precocious and self-possessed—they are pleased and proud at being so much older than awkward, bashful boys; but when they are women—why, they never cease to regret that, year for year, they are so much older than men. Thirty-five! A man squares his shoulders and smiles at the world; he is in his prime. Thirty-five! Ah, me! a woman resorts to—but no, I won't give my sex away. It is disloyal, and I like women."

"You are very wise."

I nodded. "I am years older than you."

He smiled. "I believe you will always be young. Will you ever cease to be enthusiastic, Miss Hilary?"

"Don't know what you mean, and can't say; and please stop talking about me. What I want to know is, why are you not with your patients?"

"This was an off afternoon. I had few patients to call upon. There is sometimes a slump in nerves, the same as there is in anything else. So I said to myself. 'I will walk towards Grosvenor Square, and

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see if, perchance, the spirit of Spring should be abroad'—and, lo and behold! she was."

"But rushing along more like the North wind," I suggested. "I *was* in a temper."

"Let us try to forget that—episode," he said, quietly. "There are some things it is wise to forget. Don't you think so, Miss Hilary? Dwelling on them is like probing a wound; leave it alone, and in time it will heal."

"It is difficult to be philosophical, and everybody will laugh at me. I wrote home such glowing letters. I was to be promoted so quickly; not only was I a private but a confidential secretary. Dr. Peignton would rely on me more and more. Salary was no object where I was concerned. Three pounds, four pounds, six pounds a week! I saw myself rising to giddy pinnacles of fame. In fact, I am not sure that I didn't finish up by being Queen of England. And now I am discharged, as though I had been a naughty boy stealing apples, and—insulted into the bargain. But, oh! forgive me," I added, with sudden compunction, as I saw a wave of annoyance flush his face. (What a fool I was to forget that he more or less held himself responsible for Dr. Peignton's good behaviour.) "I don't really mind now half so much as I did. Indeed, I am wondering if I have not made far too much fuss about an incident that certainly was disagreeable, but not deadly. I don't want to be a tragedy queen, Mr. Westcott. A village up-bringing tends to make one take everything very seriously, and where most people laugh we howl; and where they blink away the tears, ours roll down our cheeks."

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We trudged along in silence for a time, and I reflected what strides had our friendship made, seeing we could indulge in silence without resentment; and I was very contented.

I paused at the turning to Baker Street Station and told him I was going down to Bedford Park to my cousins.

"I will see you into your train," he said, and another silence followed; and while he mused I studied the strong, grave, good-looking face and told myself, with curious little heart-beats, that I liked Mr. Owen Westcott decidedly better than I liked most people. And I dwelt on the word liked, and made myself repeat it over several times on the way down to Bedford Park. To *like* people plainly and simply was safe and sensible, but to go beyond that was—perhaps foolish.

Dorothea answered the door to my ring. "Oh! it's you!" Disappointment was written on every line of her face.

"Yes, it's I," I said, humbly.

"I thought it was the waifs and strays, but come in."

"Thank you," I said, "and I *am* a waif. I have left Dr. Peignton."

"Gracious!" she ejaculated. "It's sooner than I expected."

"Oh!" I said.

"What I mean is, I didn't like the sound of that 'pussy' business. But come into the drawing-room—Nita is there—and tell us all about it."

Cousin Janet had gone with a friend on a mild

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jaunt of her own. To a swimming gala, Juanita thought. "Nothing of the kind," contradicted Dorothea. "To hear the Bishop of London on Lenten observances. Nita, Hilary has left her place."

Juanita placed a yellow cushion more comfortably behind her dusky head and said, gently: "I always hated dentists."

I told them my story, and Juanita gave sympathetic little nods. "Just what I should have done, Hilary dear. The man was a beast and an unfair beast; he should have told you about the surgery work."

But Dorothea took up a different attitude. She loved an argument, and was always annoyed if you came round to her way of thinking, and to signify her displeasure promptly veered round to your original position.

"I think you have been rather silly, and very proud. I can't see why you should object to such work."

"It wasn't altogether pride. It—it is not pleasant looking inside people's mouths," I objected.

"But dentists have to submit to such unpleasantness."

"From their own choice. I engaged to be a secretary."

"Well, I call it cutting off your nose. What are you going to do now?"

"I have several things in view," I replied, airily. "And after the insult I received from Dr. Peignton it seems extraordinary to me that you should evidently think I have been foolish to leave him."

She regarded me thoughtfully, her head a little

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to one side, her lips parted. "All men will kiss you," she pronounced.

"Thea!" cried Juanita, sitting up on the couch. "What *are* you saying? Now, don't get in a temper, Hilary; try to keep calm. Have some tea."

"I've had it, thanks." I turned to Dorothea. "Will you explain what you mean?"

She went off into fits of laughter. "Don't be so tragic. I don't mean anything, Hilary." She came and kissed me. "At least I don't quite mean all of it. I think a certain class of men always want to kiss any nice girl, so long as she is young, and—and alluring, like you. Nita christened you the 'will-o'-the-wisp,' don't you remember?"

"I remember it, but I never saw the connection," I returned, coldly.

She laughed again. "It is difficult to explain. Nita understands, I am sure."

"I am sure I don't," said her sister.

"Well, what I mean is, men don't want to kiss *me*." She challenged us to contradict this statement. "Nita they might want to kiss a little bit, and Hilary most of all."

"I was never kissed in my life by any man but my father till I came to London."

"There must be a dull, stupid set of men living in Ridgemoor," remarked Dorothea.

"I can't understand it," I said, throwing up my hands. "I—I thought a girl, if she valued her self-respect, was never kissed, never allowed herself to be kissed till she was engaged to be married."

"A girl doesn't, as a rule," said Juanita, hesitatingly. "But occasionally—very occasionally—

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say, at a wedding, or a first dance, or a New Year's eve, it wouldn't matter so frightfully. A girl doesn't want to be a prig, and men are but human, after all . . . and a nice man—of course—I am not recommending such a procedure, Hilary," she concluded, hastily. "I hate fast, let-themselves-go girls, but life, after all, is but short—very short." And she gave a little sigh.

"I wonder if I am a prig," I said, suddenly sitting down and going hot all over.

"Indeed, you are not," they cried together. "Anything but that. But you have had a very careful, old-fashioned training, Hilary dear. Your behaviour towards men is most circumspect. Why your mother should object to your being alone in London is a mystery to me." And Juanita lay back amongst her cushions and examined the moons of her shapely nails.

"I have had tea this afternoon with a man whom I have only known since I came up to town," I announced.

"Dear me!" Juanita now sat bolt upright.

"He is very kind, and quite old."

"Oh, if he's an old fogey, and like one's father, it——"

"He isn't a bit like a father."

"You said he was old."

"Some men are never like fathers, and some men never look anything else: the baldheaded ones, the ones with paunches, the——"

"We don't want to hear about them; we want to hear about *your* man," interrupted Dorothea; "and whatever are you getting red about?"

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"It's the fire. To have a fire in April is the most ridiculous thing I ever came across," I said, going to the window.

"It's been a bitterly cold day, and we are waiting to hear about the man," said Juanita, in her cool, deep, drawly voice. "Who is he?"

"Nobody very important—a Mr. Owen Westcott."

"The man who introduced you to Dr. Peignton?"

I nodded.

"The great nerve specialist."

"I don't think he's very great. He—he's only in Wimpole Street."

"The salt of the earth is to be found in obscure corners, Hilary Forrest," said my elder cousin, oracularly. "What was he doing—taking you out to tea?"

"Why shouldn't he?" I asked. "I may only be a very small secretary, but I'm——"

"Yes," they said, anxiously.

"Oh, nothing." I was almost getting cross. And to be cross with Juanita was a state that I should have thought almost impossible.

"Did he call for you?" enquired Dorothea.

"No, I met him. He was coming along Bond Street."

"Why wasn't he paying professional visits, or at his hospital?"

"Really!" I said, testily. "I am not his keeper, Dorothea."

She regarded me with an amused expression.

"Hem!"

Now this simple observation caused me to be really

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angry, and I jumped up and began to draw on my gloves.

"They dine at seven o'clock at Nottingham Place. Good-bye."

"But you are not going—you will stay to dinner? Mother will be awfully disappointed, and Tony is coming." Juanita was pushing me back into my chair.

"And I have six waifs and strays coming to supper in the kitchen," said Dorothea. "And we are going to play 'Simon Says Thumbs Up' with them. It's a lovely game. You are sure to know it."

"No," I returned, "I don't. I——" But Juanita was whispering in my ear. "We won't refer to him again, I promise, Hilary. But I would like to know how old he is; perhaps you will *just* tell me that while you are removing your hat and coat. No, Dorothea, I don't know where the 'Wheel of Life' is, and I am not going to watch the children have their supper. It wouldn't interest me a bit. Come along, Hilary." And she bore me away to her room and rang for hot water, and told me of the newest and most fashionable way of dressing the hair, and showed me a marvellous new dinner-gown, explaining how she got into it; and was altogether charming and adorable.

"Forty-five?" she enquired, as arm-in-arm we descended the stairs to dinner.

I looked vacant.

"You know perfectly well what I mean," she said, giving me a little pinch.

"He's—not forty," I stammered, "and I can't see why——"

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"That's all right. He's not old; and here's Tony. Tony, take Hilary in to dinner, and be very nice and polite to her. She is a little fractious."

CHAPTER XIX

AN INTERVIEW WITH AN OLYMPIAN GOD

AFTER ten minutes careful consideration on the following morning I got into my grey, and *not* green, coat and skirt, my heart still giving foolish little leaps of pleasure when I recalled all the pleasant remarks Mr. Owen Westcott had made about my green attire. Never before had anything half so nice been said about my appearance. On the fingers of one hand I could easily count up the compliments I had received in the whole of my life in Ridgemoor. And now—I closed my eyes—I was the spirit of the Spring. It was, of course, very foolish, but—very beautiful.

I looked in the mirror and received a shock when I discovered a small pimple was forming at the tip of my nose. Carefully I applied some Hazeline snow to it, and wished I had some powder.

I looked pale and uninteresting in the grey frock, but yet I stuck to it. If Mr. Head engaged people on the strength of their appearance I didn't wish to go to him. He wouldn't be—safe.

Anxious to refresh my memory on the depressing subject of cancer, at breakfast I enquired of Miss Bobbie if she could tell me of the whereabouts of a public reference library at which I could look up a subject I required immediate information upon.

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No, she was sorry she couldn't. She knew very little about London as yet. Perhaps one of the gentlemen——

"There is the British Museum, and a good reference library in St. Martin's Lane," volunteered Mr. Inglis, cautiously removing his eyes from his plate, casting me a hurried glance, and rapidly retreating to cover as he met my eyes.

I thanked him, and enquired what time they opened.

"You would require a reader's ticket for the British Museum. I don't know about St. Martin's Lane, but probably the rules there are the same."

"Oh, but I wanted to go this morning," I said, disappointed. "There is a subject I must look up as soon as possible."

"What is it?" he asked. "I—I might be able to help you."

"Cancer."

He threw me another rapid glance, and then took a jam-dish into his line of focus. His shyness had begun to irritate Mrs. Brady. She said it was too foolish in a man of his years.

"What an unpleasant subject," murmured Miss Sparrow.

"An uncle of mine died of it," announced Mr. Pidge, dexterously scraping up some yolk of an egg from his fat chin. "It was in his tongue."

"How dreadful!" everybody said.

"Yes," said Pidge, pleased with the attention he had called forth, "he suffered horribly, starved to death at the last."

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We returned to our plates, and Miss Bobbie went white. I was sorry I had introduced the subject.

"I could lend you my ticket for to-day. I have one for the British Museum," said Mr. Inglis.

I thanked him and he disappeared, bringing the ticket to the drawing-room a few minutes later, and offering it to me silently and awkwardly. I asked him the form of procedure—how I was to obtain the volumes I required.

"There are catalogues, and you write down the number and class of the books on a slip of paper and hand it in to the librarian," he replied.

Crab-like he edged towards the door as he was speaking, and, with a hurried glance at nothing in particular, bolted.

"He is very nice, but very stupid, although he is clever. I am rather glad I am not clever if I had to look like that," I told Miss Bobbie's canary; and then went upstairs to put on my hat.

Half an hour later found me at the British Museum, and I spent a dull, depressing morning in the company of stuffy pathological tomes; and by the time I had finished my research I was firmly convinced that I was developing cancer in every organ of my body.

A lunch of a poached egg on toast cheered me a little, though the egg was a bit "nesty" and the A B C damsel who served me very superior and stand-offish in her manner. I couldn't help not being a young man with a high collar, a ring, and a toothpick, however much I might desire it; and it was unkind of her to shoot the poached egg at me in the way she did, and then devote her entire at-

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tention to the dazzling male personage at the next marble-topped table. Also, if I thought fit to desire a penny slice of sultana cake, instead of a tuppenny almond-iced, that was my affair, and not hers; her part of the business being to serve me with it, and not scowl.

I walked along the Strand, composing the speech I meant to recite to Mr. Head. I would not be too flowery in my diction; for, though he himself might be a quixotic dreamer, endeavouring to make the Emperor of Germany sit down quietly for half an hour, or the Sultan of Turkey cease from chivying wretched Armenians, he would, of necessity, require practical, level-headed people around him.

I arrived at Arundel Street word perfect. My speech began after this fashion: "My friend, Lady Waterson, has kindly offered me an introduction to you, Mr. Head, having discovered the extraordinary interest I take in the treatment of dipsomania and cancer. I understand——"

"Yes, miss?" The small boy whom I had interviewed on the occasion of my previous visit stood before me.

"Is Mr. Head in?"

"Yes, miss."

"Kindly take this card to him, and ask him if he will see me."

The small boy showed me to a waiting-room and disappeared.

Five minutes later he conducted me to the Presence. In such terms I only feel able to speak of Mr. Head, of *The Last Word*. His appearance reminded me forcibly of an Olympian god: Jupiter

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or Vulcan, or somebody like that. The sort of god who towers in magnificent, muscular and unclothed condition in the vestibules of picture galleries and public squares. Not that I mean for a moment that Mr. Head was unclothed, for he wore a very correct frock coat buttoned tightly up the middle, a purple tie with long ends, and grey striped trousers with a beautiful crease. He bowed, and when he bowed I felt small and insignificant and ashamed of being a mere female, for it was a stupendous bow—stiff and inflexible from head to waist; and then he spoke, and as he spoke I didn't even feel a mere female—I felt like a small, white caterpillar, and yearned for the enfolding leaves of a cauliflower in which to crawl and hide myself.

"Miss Hilary Forrest introduced by Lady Waterson," he said, in a rich Olympian voice, staring at me through gold-rimmed glasses. And, like a small boy at school, I put up my hand, being utterly unable to do more.

"And what may I do for Miss Hilary Forrest?"

"Please," I began, "I want, and should you mind if I said it—I mean recited it like a speech?"

He drew his Olympian brows together and intimated that I, the small mere female in front of him, was a little incoherent.

"Oh!" I cried, in despair, "how could I know that you were like this? Lady Waterson never told me."

"Like what?" he asked, with human curiosity.

"So magnificent."

He smiled upon me and unbent. If he had worn corsets I should say the cord suddenly snapped.

The smile and unbending set me a little at my

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ease, and in jerky gasps I stated my case. My well-conned sentences had completely left me, my well-turned periods existed no more; along with other oratorical efforts of genius, my brilliant speech was buried in oblivion.

When I had finished, Mr. Head removed his pince-nez, and tapped the side of his nose, and looked at me thoughtfully.

"Karma has been at work here; he has spoken for you. Miss Forrest, I engage you at this moment to do the secretarial work in connection with my 'Anti-Alco' cure for dipsomania."

I clutched at my chair, to keep myself on to it. I knew that he was mad, but I cared not for that. Karma was a personage with whom I had no acquaintance, but whoever he might be, he was a jolly good sort. Later I learned that Mr. Head was a Spiritualist, and Karma was his *alter ego*, who directed him what to do. How much Karma must have disliked the poor Turkish Sultan! And what a spirit of peace he must have been! He would have been a good man to get to the Hague Conference.

"And this cure for dipsomania?" I began, timidly. And those were the last words I uttered during the interview—Mr. Head did the rest.

You have heard the rhythmic whirr of machinery—even, unbroken, persistent, endless? Advisedly I say endless; because, for all I know to the contrary, Mr. Head may still be talking of cancer, dipsomania, war and balloons.

Dazedly I retraced my steps along the Strand and made my way to Pall Mall East. Out of the volume of sound I had gained sufficient data to know that

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the two "cures" were being managed and "run" by a valuable lieutenant of Mr. Head—one Mr. Weldon—at the above address. There was not sufficient room in Arundel Street for the Vita cure for cancer and anti-alco cure for dipsomania, in addition to *The Last Word*, so they were transferred to Cockspur Street, where Mr. Weldon administered them with great skill to a suffering public.

When I presented myself with a note at the Vita depot, Mr. Weldon was out; but a small, dried-up little man who stood in front of an extremely high desk told me to be seated, though he eyed me with suspicion.

After watching me sit down, and apparently satisfied that I had no intention of stealing, he proceeded to climb up a tall, leather-seated chair, from whence he attacked a ledger which lay on the desk. He didn't approach that ledger as one who loved it; he turned its pages with a ferocious haste, every now and again pausing to look over his shoulder at me.

"Ledgers are not pleasant things," I remarked, in a conciliatory spirit.

"Eh?" said he.

I repeated my remark.

"Eh?"

Now, I had been taught by mother to regard people who said "Eh" as quite outside the pale. Educated, cultured people never use such an expression. Yet this Ribston pippin-looking man had refined features and small, delicate hands.

He had apparently heard what I had said, for he suddenly muttered: "It's not the ledgers who are to blame—it's the people inside them who won't pay

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their bills. There's a woman here now—I can't call her a lady—who has owed £2 16s. 6d. for electricities for two blessed years. Finch-Smith, that's her name, a double-barrelled woman who can't raise £2 16s. 6d."

Touched by his confidence, I displayed marked sympathy.

"I'd county-court her," he continued, "but Mr. Weldon is so soft-hearted, a soft-hearted baby, that's what I call him. I send her her bill regularly every month. I'm going to make it fortnightly now, and then weekly; she'll be sick and tired of my handwriting before I've finished with her." He addressed an envelope and gave it a vicious lick.

Somebody came into the depot and demanded three tubes of Lympho Number 3. The dried-up man scrambled down from his perch and went to a row of pigeon-holes against a wall and drew from one some tiny glass bottles. He handed three across a long table covered with books and pamphlets which served as a counter, and in return for them received the sum of three shillings.

"Was that the dipsomania remedy?" I asked, when we were alone once more.

"Eh?"

I didn't repeat my question, for I knew that he had heard.

"No, it's one of the Vita medicines—cures mumps, glands and general swellings."

"But I thought you only treated cancer and dipsomania."

"Dear me, no; we treat everything."

The door opened with a burst, and a man rushed

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into the room. I jumped up, feeling certain he was an escaped convict till he swept off his hat and gloves, and, with a swift glance at me, said: "Any news, Jones?"

"This young lady has called to see you on business, sir, and there were fifty letters by the last post. There they are"—pointing to a big bundle on a side table.

The hurried gentleman picked them up, told me to "Come this way," opened a door leading into a passage and shot up a staircase two steps at a time. I followed as rapidly as I could, and, leading the way into a small, comfortably furnished room, he asked me to sit down and say what he could do for me.

Mr. Weldon was a tall, spare man, very spare, lithe, with long arms and legs which one felt he managed to keep inside his sleeves and trouser-legs from pure accident. His face was thin, his features good: straight nose, clean-cut mouth, and startlingly keen brown eyes; and over all was an expression so alert, so searching was his gaze, so keenly did he look *into* you, not *at* you, that involuntarily you tried to cover up your bones and muscles more closely.

But he was extraordinarily nice. What was it that made this man so singularly attractive? I search about even now for an explanation. Miss Rye used to say it was his transparent honesty. Mr. Jones thought it was his kindness of disposition; the packer and office boy didn't think at all—they just loved him with an unswerving devotion. And I—well, I after a lapse of time, and because I know a little more of men in these days, think it was his simplicity.

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How often do we meet an absolutely simple person? Is a child perfectly simple? Without pose, without guile, without any form of affectation? A great writer speaks of the John whom other people know, and the John whom John knows. But there was only one John in Mr. Weldon's case.

I handed Mr. Head's note to him, which he absorbed with one swift glance. Then he smiled pleasantly and crossed one long leg over the other.

"Dipsomaniacs are rather depressing, you know," he said, in a tone which belied his statement. "I've interviewed, let me see now, twenty-five in the last two days."

"But Mr. Head spoke of clerical work, of assisting you with the correspondence. . . ."

"Yes, and I want help badly. That"—and he pointed to the bundle of letters which he had laid on a table—"is a sample of what I receive by every post. The chief, as probably you know, advertised in last month's issue of *The Last Word* for six really bad dipsomaniacs to be treated as test cases by our new cure. We are providing a home for them in Bloomsbury free of cost, in which we shall keep them for six months. They are to place themselves unreservedly in our hands, submit to be dosed and dieted, get up and go to bed when ordered, but otherwise free to come and go as they like."

"And what is the cure?" I asked, with unrestrained interest.

"Ah, that is our secret," he replied. "We have paid a large sum of money to its discoverer, and we have great faith in it. That is all I am at liberty to tell you. Upstairs hundreds of letters are lying

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unanswered for the main part, and most of them requiring individual attention. Miss Rye—she is the young lady who attends to the correspondence of the Vita cure, and who has only been with me about a fortnight, the last who had been here for two years leaving to be married—has been staying overtime to deal with the most pressing. Mr. Jones, I, even the office boy, have done what we could, thinking that the influx would only prove to be temporary; but still they come, and I shall be most glad of your help. I suppose you can type?”

I told him that I could, but I might be a little rusty from want of practice. “If you would allow me to remain late for two or three evenings I could soon rub it up.”

He said in a brisk voice I could do anything I liked. Then he asked me if I would mind having my table and typewriter in the depot below; that he would have them fixed up in a sunny window. Miss Rye’s room was only big enough for one, and his own private room must be kept for the use of “anti-alco” patients. “We only rent the three rooms and basement, where the packing is done,” he concluded, quite apologetically.

I told him I shouldn’t mind a bit. In fact, I thought to myself I should rather like to watch the patients coming and going, and the Ribston-pippin man climbing up and down his high chair.

Then Mr. Weldon asked me when I could begin work, and what time I could come.

“Any time,” I said, in surprise. “What are the hours?”

“The hours?” he seemed quite bewildered. “Oh,

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I'll leave that to you, Miss Forrest. You'll know what time suits you best."

I checked my still greater surprise, and suggested nine o'clock to half-past five.

"That will suit me capitally. Could you do some letters now?" He drew the packet towards him. "But I think I'll fetch the rest; there may be some requiring more immediate attention than these."

Without waiting for a reply, he bolted from the room, and I removed my hat and gloves. I had taken somewhat of a fancy to this thin, hurried, breathless man, and was prepared to do anything for him in reason.

He returned in about five minutes, staggering beneath the weight of an immense tray-like basket of letters and pamphlets, which he plumped down on the table.

"I have had five thousand pamphlets and leaflets printed which give particulars of treatment and cost. In most cases a copy of each will be sufficient reply. Use your discretion, and the ones you are doubtful about—yes, come in"—in answer to a knock. A bright-faced boy popped his head in: "If you please, sir, Mr. Jones wants you. A patient——"

"Excuse me," said Mr. Weldon, and he disappeared like a streak of lightning from the room.

Laughing, I sat down at a writing-table, hunted about for a pen and ink, rescued a sheet of blotting-paper from the floor, and began to work.

First I read the pamphlet and leaflet. The former interested me greatly. It gave sufficient information about the "cure" to whet the reader's curiosity and impress him with its genuineness. The drug, which

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was a bitter, tonicky preparation, was composed of several ingredients, the principal one of which was extracted from a root in South Africa, not unlike quassia in its property and action. The leaflet caused me to squirm as one does on hearing the tearing of calico. It was made up of a string of searching questions. I give two or three at random:

"Is your craving for alcohol constant, or only occasional?"

"Have you inherited your dipsomaniac tendency from either of your parents?"

"Have you ever suffered from an attack of delirium tremens?"

"Is there any insanity in either branch of your family?"

"Have you been in any home or retreat, or been under any medical treatment for your distressing malady?"

"Do you make any genuine effort to overcome your weakness?"

"I would rather be drunk every day of my life than reply to such questions," I muttered, dipping my pen into the ink and rapidly marking the letters to which I considered pamphlets would be sufficient reply. At first I only glanced through them cursorily, gradually I became interested, and, after a while, I was crying softly. Oh, the pathos of some of those letters! the tragedy! Human documents crying out for help. I think it was the letters of some of the mothers that moved me to the greatest pity. I visioned them—little old ladies trying to shield the much-loved son, lying bravely, hiding his shame from the world. "He was only a little indis-

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posed; he was sorry to break his engagement; he was not strong; he would be better soon"; and the brave, sweet smile through the misty haze of tears. And the wives! He had been so handsome, and loving, and attractive in the old days when he had promised—oh, so tearfully for her sake . . . the old, old story; and now? Well, it had been for better, for worse; and if it were all "worse," she must make the best of it; she must be patient. Death with quiet, soothing hand awaited all God's sorrowful children.

"Your sympathy is all for the women," Mr. Weldon said, some months later.

I nodded. "They feel it most. They can't get away from it. They are always at home. Men go out into the world. Besides, they don't feel the same shame. They make it a subject of ridicule. I have known them *even* laugh at a fellow-creature who has fallen not only a little lower than the angels, but lower than the beasts of the field."

Mr. Weldon returned in about an hour's time. He looked at me keenly.

"Have you had some tea? But, of course, you haven't. And it's over now. Miss Rye makes it in her room at four o'clock every afternoon. I think you have done enough for to-day."

I put on my hat, and as I left the room he said, gently: "Miss Forrest, you won't take those letters to heart. We are going to help them—the writers—you know. Good-night. And you'll be here to-morrow at nine o'clock."

CHAPTER XX

LIFE AT THE VITA DEPOT

I HAVE no clear recollection of anything in the days that followed but of pounding away at a Remington typewriter, snatching a hasty meal, rushing up and down the stairs at Mr. Welton's urgent summons to "take down" an important letter, and giving instructions to Billy, the office boy, to direct Bradbury, the packer, to send "sets" "anti-alco" medicine to importunate dipsomaniacs every hole and corner of the United Kingdom.

But I was supremely happy. Feverishly I worked; and, day by day, the huge pile of unanswered letters dwindled and dwindled, till a moment arrived when I was even with my work—nay, ahead of it—and could step back from the typewriter and heave a sigh of relief. Is there anything more satisfactory in life than the sensation of having accomplished something?

Mr. Jones abandoned his ledger, and looked round at me over his shoulder.

"So that's the way with things, is it? And thank God for small mercies!" he remarked, devoutly, sticking a pen behind one of his ears.

"What's the way?" I asked, surprised.

"That you're through 'em, worked 'em down, and can give yourself and everybody else a bit of a rest."

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"I'm afraid I've been very noisy," I said, laughing.

"Noisy!" He raised his eyebrows comically. "Ever been close to a threshing-machine? The ribbon of that thing must be a bit worn."

I bent over and examined it. "Why, it's in holes. I wondered why the type was getting so indistinct and smeary."

"The 'Vita' patients and I haven't wondered. They've looked at you quite scared. 'New lady typist for "anti-alco" dipsomaniac cure,' I explained. One gentleman remarked you looked as though you might be suffering from the complaint yourself—you were so flushed and excited."

"It was very rude of him," I said, without feeling offended. "I never noticed him."

"You've never noticed anybody. We've had three very busy days. People coming and going the whole time. This drink cure seems to have given the other cure a spurt. We were getting slack."

"Has Mrs. Finch-Smith paid her bill?"

"No." He spoke with extreme gloom.

The door leading into the passage opened, and Miss Rye, the Vita typist, asked me if I had time to go up for tea that afternoon, as it was ready, or should she send it down again? I told her I would go up, as the great rush was over. Mr. Jones called out not to forget to send his down, and begged to remind her once again that he took two lumps of sugar.

She preceded me up the staircase, and I noticed how thin and frail-looking she was, and her slimness

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was accentuated by a very severe black gown and quakerish, turned-down linen collar.

Her room was small and cosy. A kettle sang on the hearth; four cups and saucers and a plate of bread and butter were spread on a writing-table, and two chairs were placed in front of the fire. She motioned me to one of these and busied herself with two of the larger cups, placing a biscuit and a slice of bread and butter in the saucer of each, then rang for Billy, and despatched them presumably to Mr. Weldon and Mr. Jones.

"We each subscribe sixpence a week to this ambrosial feast—one or two lumps? I suppose you will like to join. Mr. Weldon wishes us to take half an hour for it; he is very kind, but I find a quarter ample; especially as we leave pretty early." She handed me a cup and the bread and butter, and then seated herself on the opposite side of the hearth.

"And do you always see to it?"

"Billy does the catering, and I make the tea. How do you like the place?"

The question was plain and abrupt, but I was in no mood to resent anything. "I like it immensely, thank you."

She stared at me incredulously. "Really?"

"Yes. Don't you?"

"I like it as much as I have liked any work of this description. Letters day after day, addressing envelopes, licking stamps are not occupations that cause your pulses to leap with excitement."

"Perhaps your 'cure' is not as interesting as mine."

"I really don't know. My work certainly doesn't

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interest me in the very least. Indeed, it bores me to extinction."

"And you have only been here a fortnight?"

"Yes, but I've been doing practically the same thing for years. Only Mr. Weldon happens to be the only *gentleman* for whom I have worked. How long have you been at the treadmill?"

When I told her for just over a fortnight she burst into derisive laughter. "Wait till you've been at it ten years, then you'll tell another story. I thought you were new at the game. Parents lost their money?"

I found it difficult to tell Miss Rye my reasons for leaving home. And as I told her, the tea in her cup went cold, her bread and butter remained uneaten, and her great black eyes became round with surprise.

"God above!" she cried, when I had finished. "Can the world contain such a——"

"Fool," I completed. "May I have some more tea, please?"

In a dream she poured it out and sat down with her eyes far away. Presently I made to go down. "Don't go," she said. "We haven't been a quarter of an hour. Let's take a half to-day, unless you're busy. You look tired."

"I am," I returned, stretching my feet out against the fender, "but I didn't know I was."

She looked at me curiously. "I've been tired for ever since I can remember, and I always know it."

"Perhaps you are not strong," I suggested, examining her small white face with its great burning eyes shadowed by a heavy cloud of coarse, black hair.

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She looked about thirty years of age, and suffering was the dominant note of her whole personality; suffering continued with a feverish restlessness and expectancy—the kind of expectant look you see on people's faces when they have heard a footstep on the gravel, a ring at the bell, a carriage draw up at the door. I used to wonder for what she was waiting, and a time came when I knew and wept for her.

"My head's a bit of a bother," she said, carelessly. "I read a lot at night. There's nothing else to do when I've washed up my supper things. I live alone in a couple of rooms, and books take the place of parents, sisters whom you have run away from."

"What do you read?" I asked, ignoring the latter part of her sentence.

"The usual gentlemen when you don't care for novels."

I didn't mention my ignorance of the "usual gentlemen," and waited for her to continue.

"Carlyle is, perhaps, the most satisfactory of the lot. He sleeps under my pillow, and I have him out sometimes at three in the morning when my plaguey head keeps me awake."

"I can't read him when I've no headache," I observed. "With me I should pitch him into the fire."

"I suppose you like Mrs. Henry Wood, and Annie Swan?"

"I have never read a book by either," I retorted, a little nettled. "I am afraid I must go back to my letters."

"Will you go out to lunch with me to-morrow? I

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go from one to two," she said, putting the cups and saucers together.

I told her I should be delighted, and went back to my letters.

Mr. Jones was seated behind a screen at the far end of the depot, enjoying his tea. His cup was large, and his face was small, and when he threw back his head to drink, his features entirely disappeared from view. Also, I discovered, he was the kind of eater who, when food was once in his mouth, couldn't possibly speak. Without appearing to notice any of this, I busied myself with filing letters; but I wondered what would happen if a customer suddenly came in and demanded one of the Vita medicines. Mr. Jones took a large bite of biscuit, and a customer opened the door and walked in. Now, everybody knows how dry biscuit sticks. Poor Mr. Jones made a manful effort to swallow it, and choked in the attempt. The customer, a red-faced man, rapped on the pamphlet-covered table, and Mr. Jones from behind his screen looked at me beseechingly. But I didn't move; I was an anti-alco secretary, not a Vita assistant. It would be beneath my dignity to stand behind a table-counter. Mr. Jones now carelessly allowed a crumb of the biscuit to go down the wrong way. It was inconsiderate, I thought, for the red-faced man was rapping on the table with his stick. I signed to Mr. Jones to drink some tea, to help the crumb, but he was either stupid or obstinate, for he simply continued to cough. And then upon my astonished ears fell this remark: "Come, young lady, are you going to keep me here all day? Three

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tubes of Dyspepso Number 2, and one tube of Broncho; and look sharp. I've a train to catch."

For a second I stood motionless, staring at him; then I walked the length of the room and stood confronting him. "Were you addressing me?" I asked, frigidly.

"Of course I was. Did you think I was talking to the chairs and tables? There"—he planked down four shillings—"Dyspepso—third pigeon-hole from the end; Broncho—first in bottom row. I've only got five minutes for my train. Thanks. Good-day." The door banged, and I stood with the four shillings before me, not sure if I were standing on my head or my heels.

Mr. Weldon came in through the other door, and finding me thus fairly beamed upon me.

"That's right," he cried, cheerfully. "Been doing a little business while Mr. Jones has his tea. Interesting subject, these Vita medicines. I know more about them than most men, and still they never cease to surprise me. The results obtained from their administration are nothing short of marvellous. Shall we have a little chat about them now, and have a rest from those letters? You have worked magnificently, Miss Forrest. Anti-alco has been going like hot cakes. Eight sets of medicine gone off this afternoon. The test cases arrive to-morrow; three men and three women—poor souls. I hope we shall get good results. Now about those Vita remedies." He placed a chair for me in front of the pigeon-holes and motioned me to be seated. "Baron Frangipanni . . . " But it would be better, perhaps, for me to tell of Baron Frangipanni and his wonderful sys-

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tem of homeopathic treatment and medicines in my own language. And this not from any undue conceit that my diction is superior to that of Mr. Weldon, but because Mr. Weldon spoke in technicalities. And the reader has been so patient up to now that I would not try his endurance further. Technicalities at the best of times are a trifle wearing; but Baron Frangipanni's technicalities, till one had learned to understand and value them in all their subtle beauty, had a tendency to drive one to drink or suicide. The chief was a farther seeing man than on the surface one would have supposed. With his playful Frangipanni ways he drove credulous humanity to dissolute habits. And then cured them with anti-alco.

I cannot put Mr. Weldon's enthusiasm into my dissertation; the wave of his hand, the flash of his bright eye, the mantling colour. But I will say that so much did he infect me with his ardour, so much did he impress me with his earnestness and belief in what he taught, that for the remainder of my stay at the depot I not only cheerfully sold the Vita remedies to customers *across the table*, but with equal cheerfulness I took them myself.

The medicines were divided into groups or classes. There was the Doloroso group: lymphatic diseases. Dyspepso group: digestive complaints. Broncho: pulmonary and lung. Febrile: fevers. Pulso: heart, etc., etc. There were several medicines in each group. For example, there were three Dyspepsos: Numbers 1, 2 and 3. Dyspepso Number 1 was for heartburn and uneasy sensation in the region of the stomach; Number 2 for sluggish liver, dizziness, lethargy;

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Number 3 for flatulence and acrid risings. These were more in demand than any other of the medicines, Mr. Weldon said, owing to overeating. Next to these in popularity was Uricodol, the remedy for gout and rheumatic affections. But the group of electricities interested me most. These were in liquid form, colourless and without any odour. They might have been distilled water but for some minute stringy atoms which could be discerned quite plainly when the liquid was shaken up. This was the electricity, I supposed, which Baron Frangipanni, being a most resourceful chemist as well as herbalist, extracted from vegetable matter. There was an enormous future for vegetable electricity, the Baron predicted, and worked early and late in his laboratory. He had named his electricities after four of the planets, and charged four and sixpence a bottle for each. There was Jupiter, which, if applied to a bleeding wound, would instantaneously check it.

"Is it a tincture of cobwebs?" I cried, excitedly. And Mr. Weldon, in a distant voice, said *that* was Baron Frangipanni's secret.

Then there were Saturn, Mars and Uranus. Mars, if applied outwardly, would dispel headache; Saturn, toothache; Uranus, deafness.

It was all most intensely interesting.

The remedies to be taken internally were apparently most powerful in their action, and I wondered at the Baron's recklessness in offering them to a careless public. The little white pillules were no longer than seed pearls; yet, according to the directions, one of these was too strong for an ordinary tumblerful of water; for, after dissolving it in this

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amount, you were directed to take a teaspoonful of this and put it to another tumblerful of water, and again a teaspoonful of this to a third tumblerful of water. And this last you could drink—but slowly. Either the remedies were as strong as dynamite or cyanide, or the Baron, knowing that ninety-nine hundredths of the waste products of the body are water, was an advanced hydropathist. And the clever Baron was sufficiently clever to keep his own secret. A patent-medicine vendor, to succeed financially, must be of a reserved disposition.

"It is a most uncommon and fascinating system of treatment," I said, when Mr. Weldon had finished. "I must study the whole subject at my leisure."

"You will derive a good deal of information from these pamphlets," he returned, waving his hand in the direction of the table. "*The Vade Mecum* is invaluable as a guide. And, Miss Forrest"—he lowered his voice—"I wonder whether you would mind, as you will be in the room, attending to the patients in Mr. Jones's or my absence? When he is out at lunch, for instance, or when he is having his tea behind the screen. He—he chokes a little at times."

"I know," I whispered, nodding. "He choked this afternoon, very badly."

"Exactly. He does it pretty frequently. And—of course, he's not very strong. And he doesn't look—splendid little chap though he is, never had a better cashier—he doesn't look——"

"A good advertisement for the Vita cure," I suggested.

"Well, I hardly meant that . . . I——" He busied himself with the tubes of tabloids. "Anyway,

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[I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind, Miss Forrest, as you seem interested——"]

"But I couldn't prescribe for the patients," I interrupted, in alarm. "I don't know anything about medicine."

"Of course you don't. And you needn't prescribe. They generally know what they want themselves. And if they don't, and you are in doubt, detain them till I come in, if I have been called away on business."

"Ve-ry well," I agreed, doubtfully; and before I could say another word Mr. Weldon had shot out of the depot and up the stairs. His movements were always astonishingly sudden.

On my way to Nottingham Place that evening I debated with myself as to what there was in my appearance which led my employers to wish to change me into something I had never engaged to be: First, a dental assistant; next, a chemist's—I mean a consulting physician's assistant. And Sir Nigel Montmorency had implored me to be a gardener, or an inventor of patent strawberry-pickers. Perhaps I wore a chameleon air. I craned forward, to look at myself in a shop-window's mirror, but an elderly lady, hot on the track of five- and eleven-penny pongee silk blouses, promptly ousted me with the spokes of her umbrella.

CHAPTER XXI

AN EVENING IN WIMPOLE STREET

MR. OWEN WESTCOTT had expressed great pleasure at my meeting with another engagement in so short a space of time. In fact, I am not sure that he wasn't under the impression that *he* had been the means of directing my steps to Mr. Head, of *The Last Word's* way.

He informed me during the pleasant evening I spent at his house that he had told me so; that he had predicted success, and that he knew the green frock would work the oracle. I suppressed the fact that I had worn the unbecoming grey; and smiled at Lady Waterson behind his back, in the way that all women and girls smile at men who are nice, and dear, and transparent. For Mr. Owen Westcott viewed in an entirely impersonal way was very nice and quite a dear—any girl would have voted him such—and I wasn't going to take the slightest notice of Juanita and Dorothea's rubbish. They were not going to spoil my pleasant friendship with this grave tired-faced man, who had been so kind to me, so sympathetic, and so very interested. In return for his sympathy I could but do my best to chase away the tire from the strong sensitive face, and bring the slow smile to his lips, conjure up the peculiar abrupt laugh.

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And on this evening I learned a reason for the anxious look. His mother, the mother whom he had spoken of as an invalid, was dying slowly and most painfully of the dread and insidious disease which Mr. Head had set out to cure. The disease which the very strongest and most stoical shrink from in deadly fear and horror; and of which I had been speaking so lightly, so carelessly, only a few hours before. Cancer! Oh, ye reformers, with your Utopian dreams of a world without poverty, of cities without dirt, of a government without prosy, wheezy lords, of a European, American, African, and Asiatic federation, devote all your time, and money, and brains for a brief space to the study of this—up to now—invincible foe. Set chemists, scientists, bacteriologists to the task. Stamp it out, eradicate it if you can. A man once said: “I would rather die of the plague than of cancer. One is d——d short hell, and the other is d——d long hell.”

Mrs. Westcott lay on a couch drawn up to a bright, wood fire, and she was covered with a soft, white rug. Her hair was white, and her face was white and drawn, and the flowers on her table were white. Somehow, it seemed to me that the dread visitor was already creeping very close—so wan and weary was this poor little lady—and perhaps she would be glad. Glad but for the sake of the dear son who loved her so devotedly, who tended her so carefully, and so stoically, Lady Waterson said. Never giving way before her, always finding a smile for her, a gay word, a cheerful story, and afterwards in the privacy of his own room biting his lips in im-

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potent rage at his inability to give her any relief from her suffering. Drugs, morphia, narcotics were no longer efficacious in dulling the pain. It simply had to be borne with what patience and endurance a sorely-tried, racked human being can conjure up when he or she is down at bed-rock.

To-night a wave of peace had lifted her momentarily from the grim bed-rock, and she smiled, and talked a little—asking me about my home, my work, the boarding-house. She laughed outright when I told Lady Waterson of my interview with Mr. Head, and gave them a description of the Vita and anti-alco cures. We were all gathered on the hearth around her couch—Lady Waterson, serene, and gracious as usual, in a beautiful dinner-gown of soft mauve velvet; I in mother's lavender silk, which I had filled in with lace at the throat; Mr. Westcott, distinguished as it is possible for a man to be in an ugly, black dinner-coat. He was not grim to-night nor tired. He was the pleasant, courteous host, handing coffee, pushing footstools in front of deep easy chairs, stirring the wood fire to leaping, crackling brilliancy. I liked his home. It was neither decorative nor even pretty, but it was solid and comfortable, and no jarring note of ornateness, or garishness broke up the even, mellow *tout ensemble* of plain, subdued-tinted walls, dull-hued old Persian carpets, and black, carved furniture. It was exactly the home I should have conceived Mr. Owen Westcott to live in.

"Did you," I asked impetuously, when Lady Waterson and Mrs. Westcott had for a moment excluded us from the general conversation and were

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talking to each other in low tones, "make all this out of your own brains? Just by yourself, none to help you?" Our friendship had got beyond the stage when any unusual questions are regarded as idle and impertinent curiosity. Mr. Westcott asked me direct questions, and I returned the compliment by asking him the same.

"I had a fairly decent education"—he drew his chair a little nearer to mine—"and that is a good start. And I was always a hard worker. I have done a lot of grinding, one way or another, and assurance and luck have done the rest. I don't take any special credit to myself for the position I have gained."

"Well, why don't all men come out on top who have had the same opportunities? Look at the poor G. P.'s in the country."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps lack of the right opportunity, or not seizing their chances when they came along."

I shook my head. "It's not altogether that. First, it's lack of brains that are original; then it's lack of grit. There are lots of brains capable of absorbing knowledge, but how many brains are there capable of creating anything? It's the creative force we want, not the receptive."

"You are a very wise young lady, Miss Hilary," he said, with his slow smile.

"And I am not earning a couple of pounds a week. I—and that reminds me——" I broke off suddenly, and stared into the fire.

"Yes?" he asked, presently. "You didn't finish. It reminds you——"

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"That the salary Mr. Weldon is to give me was never alluded to. I was so excited at his engaging me that I forgot all about it."

"There seems to be a want of concentrative and commercial ability here," he observed, smilingly sarcastic.

"Yes," I agreed, ruefully. "It was a momentary lapse. My commercial instincts are really strongly developed. I think I shall demand thirty shillings a week. Not twenty-five. Twenty-five is a sum it is possible to manage on, but difficult. It means approaching your maternal grandmother who some day might cut up disagreeably and send you away with a flea in your ear."

"But are you not afraid that such a sum might break the bank?" he asked, with extreme gravity.

I searched for and found the twinkle that I guessed would be there.

"My work could be done by anybody," I explained.

"I really doubt it. Even *you* failed in a dental crisis."

"That is unkind of you, and I chose to fail."

He leant back in his roomy chair with evident enjoyment. "I think—nay, I am sure—you are worth more than thirty shillings a week, Miss Hilary."

I told him I was doubtful, though I was pleased at his recognition of my value; that shorthand and typing were more or less mechanical acquirements within the reach of anyone who had not lost his memory, or the possessor of rheumatically fingers.

"It's not that," he said. "It's because you are new at the game. You are in earnest. You have

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not yet become stale or tired. Clerical work tends to stultify the brain. I have a little cousin who has been at your sort of work for years, and she is very weary."

"And the girl who does the secretarial work of the Vita cure at Mr. Weldon's is also very tired. And but for a curiously expectant look she always wears one would imagine her to be without hope, either in this world or the world to come."

"That is very like my cousin," he mused. "I have not seen her for a month; I must look her up. She has been in a private bank for some years, and lives in a couple of rooms of her own."

"I don't think that is wise," I observed. "Boarding-houses are not delectable places; mine is an exception, owing to the two little ladies who run it, but in such places society of a certain class is to be found which, however dull and uninteresting, is better for you than living alone and becoming bored and introspective. We were dull at home. We were too exclusive, kept too much to ourselves, consequently if our daily routine was in any way interrupted mother imagined the skies were falling, and we girls were always analysing our feelings and sensations and other people's feelings and sensations. Now, I have no time to do anything but catch 'buses, wonder whether sixpence will go farther at Lyon's or an A B C, and mend my stockings, and dip into a novel on my way to bed."

"But I rather imagined girls who were obliged to work for their living were a little injured towards their parents and the State for not providing them with the necessary wherewithal."

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"I don't know," I replied. "I am unacquainted with working girls, but probably their injured condition arises from the fact that, in nine cases out of ten, they have not been trained to earn their living. A father unreasonably goes and dies, leaving his family unprovided for. The boys are all right: one is a solicitor, another a chartered accountant, a third in a merchant's office; but the girls—well, they can be mothers' helps to Christian clergymen, or companions to doddering old ladies, or housekeepers to anybody who will have them, and sell themselves, body and soul, for twenty pounds a year." Unconsciously I had raised my voice, and Lady Waterson and Mrs. Westcott were smiling listeners. "Yes," I continued, a trifle defiantly, "I am very interested in girls and their work. They are never paid as well as men—not even when they are doing exactly the same thing. I had a heated argument with a horrid German the other night; and he said, in the tone that German men always adopt when speaking to a mere woman, that women would never be paid as highly as men on account of domestic reasons. That as soon as they became valuable they got married. Now, that is a mean, low-down excuse. Some women never marry. You have only to look at them to know they will always be spinsters, but they are no more highly paid. In fact, a pretty girl who is likely to marry will most probably earn a better salary than the plain, unattractive girl who will always be single."

"Oh!" Mr. Westcott's amused interjection as he rose quietly and heaped some logs on the fire annoyed me.

"Yes," I said. "A man may be as ugly as sin and

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his hideousness will in no way interfere with his career."

"Miss Hilary," Lady Waterson and Mr. Westcott spoke together, and Mr. Westcott gave way to the former, and smilingly she continued: "What you say is perfectly true—a plain, unattractive woman usually has a pretty rough time in the battle of life. It seems unjust, but it will never be altered, so long as men are the sole legislators of the country."

"Good heavens!" cried Mr. Owen Westcott, whimsically afraid, "are we going to have a political discussion? For I am only one poor man to three quite exceptional women."

"No," said Lady Waterson. "We are not going to have a political discussion. At present, as one of our gifted women speakers suggested, we are conning our lesson: 'When is a woman a person?' It is a conundrum at first sight, difficult for the mere female intellect to unravel. But, with perseverance, we *have* unravelled it, and now we know where we are. 'When is a woman a person?' Answer: 'When the government requires a little money.' 'When is a woman *not* a person?' 'When the country is appealed to to elect to that government the most suitable and representative *men*. N. B.—not women.'"

"Lady Waterson," said Mr. Westcott, earnestly, "may I offer you a little whiskey and water?"

"Thank you, Owen," returned Lady Waterson. "Stimulants I rarely touch. But, pray, help yourself."

"You are most kind. Your health, Lady Waterson, Miss Hilary, and"—a slight pause—"my dear mother."

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A servant entered the room and announced that Lady Waterson's automobile was waiting. She offered to take me round to Nottingham Place, but Mr. Westcott interposed quietly that he was accompanying me home, just as though such an arrangement had been made months previously. She seemed in no way surprised, and, as she said good-bye, expressed her pleasure at my "views," and asked me to go down again to Richmond at as early a date as possible, so that we might finish our discussion on the position of working-women.

"Bring Mr. Westcott with you," she said, with laughter in her voice. "He is an old-fashioned, superior, obstinate man, and you must see what *you* can do with him."

"We will come next Sunday," he said, so promptly that I could only gasp, and the next moment we had said farewell to poor, sweet Mrs. Westcott, and he was conducting us down the staircase to the door.

"I am afraid I shall have to go down to Bedford Park to my cousins' next Sunday," I said, from a feeling of perversity, as we left the house. "I—I am *sometimes* engaged, you know."

"I am sorry," he said, with such evident disappointment that at once I relented.

"Oh, I can go. I will put off my visit to another time. But it was a little calm, don't you think, to speak for me?"

He stopped walking, and the abrupt, sudden laugh sounded gently subdued in the quiet street.

Nettled, I walked on with my head in the air. In a moment he was at my side, staring into my face in the flickering light of a street-lamp.

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"Are you offended, Miss Hilary? I—I never dreamed of your being like that. I——"

"Of being like what?" I demanded.

"On your dignity. Of course I ought not to have answered for you. It was most calm, as you suggest, and very rude. I don't know what came over me. I think it was my keenness to go with you. We had such a pleasant afternoon on the last occasion, and I *did* so want another. And we have been such very good—comrades, haven't we?" The pleading in his voice touched me. Mother's wise admonitions were scattered to the four winds of heaven. I *couldn't* be dignified and distant towards this interesting, grave-faced man. And as I wavered he completed my undoing by murmuring, ruefully: "Will you forgive me, Miss Hilary?"

"Of course I will," I cried, heartily. "Mother said I must always stand on my dignity, Mr. Westcott, with m—with everybody. That I mustn't make myself too cheap. I'm not really a prig."

"A prig!"

"Yes. I began to wonder the other night if that's what I was. My cousins reassured me on the point. But I'm not sure. You see—our training and upbringing has been very, very careful. We can't see ourselves as others see us. And—I should hate to be a prig. I think I would rather be a—murderer."

Mr. Owen Westcott leant against a railing, and for a moment laughed painfully. Then, laying his hand lightly on my shoulder, he said, with great earnestness: "You are not a prig, little Miss Hilary. Shall I tell you what you—what I think and know you are?"

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"Please," I laughed. And—then meeting a look in the grave eyes which I had never previously seen in any other man's eyes—I said, with a sudden, breathless catch: "No, thank you, Mr. Westcott."

His hand fell from my shoulder, and did I fancy that I heard him mutter, beneath his breath: "She is right; it is too soon." Rapidly I walked along the street, my heart beating in curious and strange fashion, my cheeks aflame, my pulses leaping.

"Why this hurry, Miss Hilary?" came a calm, unruffled voice; and I paused, ashamed and angry.

"It is late. And I shall be keeping the Misses Sparrow up," I said, incoherently.

"It isn't eleven o'clock, and we are nearly there. What time shall we meet on Sunday, and where? Or shall I call for you?"

"Baker Street Station at half-past three?" I suggested.

"That would suit me nicely," he said, placidly. "And, Miss Hilary"—we were at the Misses Sparrow's door now—"you need not be afraid of me. A moment ago I imagined that you wished to remind me that I am a middle-aged man. I thought I saw it in your eyes. You would be too kind to say it outright. Youth is sometimes kinder than one imagines. I will try not to give you cause to repeat that reminder, however difficult it may be to me."

"Your imagination erred," I contradicted, "I had no such thought in my mind, Mr. Westcott. I do *not* regard you as a middle-aged man, and I don't care if you are. I don't care if you are a hundred," I added, recklessly. "Good-bye," and I disappeared into the house and flew up the staircase to my room.

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Why I sat on the bed, staring fixedly at my jug and bowl for half an hour, I am unable to say. And that I went to sleep smiling, and woke up laughing, I admit were symptoms of a serious mental derangement. And so equable did my temper become that when I collided heavily with Pidge on the first landing a day or two later, all I said was: "Don't mention it, Mr. Pidge, my fault as much as yours, the landing is dark. And my skin doesn't discolour readily."

CHAPTER XXII

MY FRIENDS EXPRESS THEIR OPINION OF THE FRANGI-PANNI TREATMENT

THE comments of my friends upon my change of work were not a little annoying. The views of the British public upon anything *new* are more narrow and conservative than those of most people. Mother's comments were prompt and caustic.

"Your letter with its news came as a great surprise to us," she wrote, "and I personally fail to understand why you should have objected to giving Dr. Peignton the assistance he required in his surgery. The work you have elected to do is, as you are aware, extremely distasteful to me. I become no more reconciled to it. The Allardyce women have, in the past, been content to remain at home, engaging themselves in useful and feminine pursuits. Still, as you have taken such a 'step,' I wish you had remained with Dr. Peignton. He, at least, is a qualified man, and elderly, therefore a man to be trusted to treat you with consideration and respect." I paused to giggle here, for I had, in my letter, suppressed the kissing episode. "Grosvenor Square, too, is an aristocratic neighbourhood, whereas Cockspur Street is on the fringe of the city. Mr. Head, the little I know of him, I dislike and distrust. He was mixed

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up, a few years ago, in a very questionable and much-discussed case. He is a Socialist, I believe. And a Socialist is very rarely a gentleman, and not often clean. The treatment of which you write—both the ‘Vita’ and ‘anti-alco’—appears to be quackery of the very worst description. What induced you to accept such a position is incomprehensible to me, after the careful training you have received. I still continue to hope that a day will come when you will return to your senses and your home, full of thankfulness for the comforts——”

“Mother, dear,” I cried, “you are going to refer once again to the good food, the good fires, the warm eider-downs. I know you are, and I don’t feel I can stand it. There are limits to all things. So I think I won’t finish your letter to-day. I’ll just consign it to the flames, for fear you have enumerated those terrible monotonous ‘comforts.’ And I will read Miranda’s over again:

“Father and I think you are frightfully clever to have met with another post so quickly. But, of course, most people who saw you would want to engage you. How you dare face that alarming Olympian, as you call him, though I don’t quite know what you mean, is a mystery to me. It leaves me breathless. Grandmother shrieked with laughter when we read her your letter, and said if you prescribed for people in the casual manner you appeared to be doing you would be ‘run in,’ and mother got worse than ever about it, and went and gave cook notice for putting tea-leaves down the sink, and then started on a holland garden coat for father,

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which he eyes askance in a most depressed fashion. We are having lovely weather and the wallflowers and daffodils are nicer than usual. There, I am trying to make you envious. Abinadab said, only this morning: 'The garding and flowyers seems quite lonesome without Miss Hilary; when's she comin' back?' And I returned: 'Abinadab, Miss Hilary is engaged in selling patent medicines, and has forgotten the garden and flowers.' 'Patent medicines!' he ejaculated, wiping his boots on the edge of his spade. 'Things like Sequah and Mother Siegel's Syrup?'

"'Oh, nothing half so common as those,' I returned. 'She is treating dipsomaniacs.'

"Of course he didn't understand what I meant by that, so I went closer to him and whispered: 'Drunkards.'

"He nearly fell on his face with astonishment and dismay, and shouted: 'Lord love us! I always knew Miss Hilary was a rum 'un, a bit queer 'ere'—and he tapped his forehead and winked knowingly. I am not sure that mother doesn't share Abinadab's opinion, for I heard her say to grandmother that you were eccentric, and she didn't know where your peculiarities came from. And grandmother replied: 'She is the only one among you with a grain of sense.' This was rude to Mick and me, but I didn't mind. I know you'll think me a pig, Hilary, but I wish you had been unsuccessful in finding another berth. Yes, I do. I missed you badly enough in the Winter, but on these long Spring days I miss you more. What lovely walks we used to have! Now, nobody finds any nests, or primroses growing wild.

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I start off for a lonely constitutional through the valley fields to the Roman Bridge, or down Ridgemoor Dale, and I say to myself: 'I am going to find interesting things, like Hilary,' and I don't find a single thing but a fierce cow which terrifies me into fits, or a flock of fussy geese which hiss at me. When are you coming home for a holiday? You appear to see a great deal of this Mr. Westcott, and I am wondering . . . but, of course, you said you were never going to be married.

"Your loving

"MIRANDA."

"My dear Miranda," I said, with some irritation, "can a person never be allowed to change his mind? Consistent people are invariably self-satisfied and provoking."

I put on my hat and coat, and went down to Bedford Park. It was a Saturday afternoon, and some two or three weeks since I had seen the Cartons.

I found the family seated in the drawing-room, pricing and ticketing various articles for a bazaar. Tony knelt in front of the window seat, and, with knitted brow denoting great concentration, was chasing coloured beads along taut wire strings.

They rallied me on my lengthy absence, and expressed their earnest desire for particulars of my new work.

"There's a cushion for your back, and a footstool for your feet," said Juanita; "and now go on. And don't miss anything."

And I did as I was told. I described the "Vita"

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and "anti-alco" medicines, how they were administered, and their effect upon the patients. In glowing terms I spoke of the electricities: Jupiter, Mars, Uranus and Saturn; of their founder, the great and scientific Baron Frangipanni. I told them of the home in Bloomsbury, in which the six test cases were being treated for dipsomania; of the sad way in which three of the patients arrived: the poor solicitor with the cab full of snakes, the wretched doctor who insisted he was not drunk, he had never been drunk in his life, had never tasted anything but water, and who fell over nothing as he entered the home; of the young woman who arrived with a bottle of brandy in her pocket—a medicine bottle which she stoutly declared contained nothing but a hair-wash. I described my fellow-workers: Mr. Jones, Miss Rye; I mentioned my admiration for my employer, Mr. Weldon, and my awe of the chief, Mr. Head. And, with proud emphasis, I dwelt on the fact that, in Mr. Weldon's absence, I prescribed for the "Vita" patients with beneficial results.

"You prescribe for the patients?"

Tony left his beads and confronted me, kneeling.

"Yes," I said. "Only this morning when I was alone in the depot, a man entered and demanded some medicine for varicose veins. He turned up one of his trouser-legs and showed me a cluster of veins all knotted and swollen like whipcord. It was a most painful sight. I recommended Phlebito Number 2. I went behind the screen and looked it up in the *Vade Mecum*.

"The little man was so grateful for my advice, and bought two tubes of the Phlebito."

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Much to my annoyance, as I concluded my story, they all went off into fits of laughter, Tony swaying about on the backs of his heels, and Dorothea wiping her eyes with a netted doyley.

"I cannot see anything to laugh at," I said, coldly. "You are a most easily amused family, as I have remarked before."

"Hilary, you are too delicious," sighed Juanita.

"But why?"

"Because you are. It is impossible to explain."

"And you spoke, a few weeks back, of the dignity of work, the beauty of work. I am sure you didn't quote Ruskin's essay to working-men," said Tony, closing his eyes.

"My work *is* dignified and beautiful," I flashed. "It is helping suffering humanity to suffer less."

"Oh!" Tony stuffed a pocket handkerchief into his mouth, and Dorothea sat down on a rolling-pin which Cousin Janet with some dexterity had converted into a cup-hook studded key-rack, so causing Dorothea to rise with an exclamation of pain.

"You don't consider it charlatanism of the very rankest description? That you are lending yourself to the administration of quack medicines?" asked the former when he had recovered his breath.

"When it has been proved to be quackery I will believe it," I replied, stoutly. "Not till then. Mr. Head and Mr. Weldon are absolutely honest men, of that I am convinced."

"All cranks are honest," he pronounced, "but very misguided."

"Not necessarily," I began, when Juanita entreated us not to argue further, as she wanted to

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hear more particulars of the poor dipsomaniacs. Had any of the test cases been intoxicated since their arrival at the home? And was the treatment in any way similar to that of the Keeley gold cure? And did we expect to effect any permanent cures?

"It is difficult to say at present," I returned. "But we are hoping for the best. Our treatment is based on practical lines. When a man who has been a hard drinker first gives up stimulants he necessarily suffers from a sinking sensation, loss of vitality, enormous depression. We step in here. We administer large doses at the beginning, gradually reducing the amount, a drug containing great stimulating and tonic properties, which gives tone to the system.

"Thus the patient has a start. Then we feed him up—plenty of nourishing plain food is prescribed. The patient's appetite is returning, which is a good sign. He sleeps well, his eye is becoming bright, his tongue clean, his self-respect is returning, his moral balance is restored. And all the time we are giving small quantities of anti-alco, gradually reducing the dose, till a day comes when he can do without it. We have made a whole sound man of him, physically and mentally. Whether he will stand permanently, we cannot guarantee, no physician is superhuman. But we have given him his start; he must do the rest."

Juanita and Dorothea had laid down their hair-tidies and pen-wipers, Cousin Janet's scissors were poised suspended in the air, and Tony had abandoned his beads. They were all looking at me, and, to my amazement, none of them laughed.

"It sounds quite a feasible treatment," said Tony,

MY FRIENDS EXPRESS THEIR OPINION

at length; "it is practical, as you say. But if this Mr. Head has got hold of a good thing, and is the philanthropist he is represented to be, why doesn't he give it to the world free of charge?"

I rejoined that the test cases were being treated free for six months.

"And the others?"

"Why, they pay, of course. Even a philanthropist must live."

"And what do you charge per bottle?"

"We don't sell it in single bottles. One would be of no use. A set of four, which is sufficient for the treatment, is five guineas to those who can afford. And we reduce it to thirty shillings or even less to those who are poor."

"Oh!" said Tony; and I thought it a foolish observation.

Cousin Janet, returning to her ticketing, enquired what I was earning a week.

When I told her, they all expressed astonishment at the magnitude of the sum. That, of course, I might be worth it, but that many a clerk with a wife and family didn't earn more than thirty-five shillings a week. I told them that I, too, had been surprised, and Dorothea said there was no accounting for anything. Cousin Janet asked what my mother thought of my new position, and when I told her she sighed sympathetically and suggested I should remove my outdoor things, as, of course, I was remaining for the evening.

Juanita, who accompanied me upstairs, enquired carelessly what I had been doing with myself on my holidays during the three weeks.

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I combed my hair and examined my back through a hand-glass.

Juanita repeated her inquiry.

"I went for a walk with Mrs. Brady—a fellow-boarder—one afternoon."

"Yes, and that leaves five others."

"I am not a prisoner at the bar, and do not feel called upon to gratify your curiosity. What have you been doing?"

She laughed good-humouredly and said her actions could be proclaimed on the house-tops.

"So could mine," I retorted.

"And what about your mother knowing?"

"For a moment I have ceased considering mother on every possible occasion. To be always worrying about one's parents limits one's actions, Juanita. Shall we go down? I am ready," I said.

CHAPTER XXIII

MISS BYE WEEPS

LIFE moved very pleasantly in the weeks that followed. June, with its wealth of leaves and flowers, arrived. The parks were gay with a throng of happy people. London was at its best.

The Misses Sparrow prospered. Pidge's pimples faded. Mr. Inglis had been known to regard the parlour-maid with both eyes at one and the same time (perhaps in a moment of mental abstraction), and Mrs. Brady blossomed forth into a ravishing costume and hat of heliotrope. On a hint from her that my wardrobe needed replenishing, I purchased a couple of cotton frocks, and in a humble little note to mother besought aid from the old chest. An old pink organdie and a lecture arrived by return of post. The one I had fashioned to a semblance of up-to-dateness, and the other I carefully consigned to the flames.

I had still to be careful of money. Thirty-five shillings was a princely salary (Mr. Weldon had apologised for the smallness of the sum when he had offered me this), but I was now paying more to the Misses Sparrow. They were unwilling to take it, but it contented me. Five shillings a week I insisted upon sending to grandmother towards re-

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paying her loan of five pounds. She said my pride stank in her nostrils, and I replied that she had always been plain of speech. The remainder of my salary went on lunches, clothes, 'buses, sundries, and it panned out to eight and one-half pence a day. But it was wonderful how far that sum could be made to go when judiciously expended. I only took a 'bus on wet days, and sixpence for lunch brought a sumptuous repast: Roll and butter, prunes and whipped cream, slice of cake (the one-penny variety)—sixpence (glass of water thrown in). Two ham sandwiches, piece of short-bread, glass of stone ginger beer—sixpence. This I found could be procured at some stores in Bedford Street, and the ginger beer was so good that it went to my head, and later on I fell asleep with my head on the typewriter, and I always hoped an anti-alco patient hadn't called and seen me.

Miss Rye, who usually accompanied me on my luncheon expeditions, took no pleasure in her mid-day meal. She was fanciful and fastidious to a degree, and, with her nose in the air, would sit and sniff and condemn everything that was put before her. The bread was heavy, the butter rancid, the appointments of the table dirty.

"Sit with your back to the light, and choose a dark corner, and then you can't see," I would advise, whilst surreptitiously wiping the edge of my own stained cup with a handkerchief. "We must all eat our ordained peck of dirt."

"I would prefer knowing what constitutes mine," she said, drily, wiping the handle of her knife.

I was too busy munching a tough two-penny meat

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pie to point out to her that such knowledge would be of no use to anybody. By one o'clock I was always reduced to a state of painful emptiness. Writing letters to enquirers after "anti-alco" and interviewing "Vita" patients were bracing occupations. Gradually, little by little, the task of prescribing for the patients in Mr. Weldon's absence had devolved upon me. Mr. Jones took so long to crawl up and down his high chair, and his coughing-fits when taking his tea behind the screens were so numerous, that the position of consulting physician was almost forced upon me. And I *will* say that I enjoyed it, and nobody died. I got over the tiresome, lengthy formula of the one teaspoonful and one tumbler of water, and a teaspoonful of this to another tumbler of water, and a teaspoonful of this to a third tumbler of water, by simply ordering one tabloid to be dissolved in a gallon of water, and a tumblerful of this to be drunk by the patient.

Mr. Weldon happened to come into the depot one day when I was giving these directions, and when the patient had gone he asked me what I meant by mentioning a gallon. Baron Frangipanni had never suggested the use of such a measure, and his directions, to ensure success, should be followed implicitly.

I told him I had worked the whole thing out mathematically, and a gallon of water to each tabloid was the correct amount. That I thought it was no good worrying the patients' heads with teaspoons and tumblers when one simple measure would work the oracle.

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"Yes," said Mr. Weldon, doubtfully, "but the other sounds more professional."

"You mean ordinary people who go to allopathic and homeopathic doctors are accustomed to dealing with teaspoons and tumblers."

"Exactly. They will feel more at home with them. A gallon of water might frighten some patients—especially men."

"But they haven't to drink all that," I protested, "only a tumblerful."

"I know, but I think I should keep to the original formula, Miss Forrest." And I said: "Very well."

It was a pleasure, and no hardship, to fall in with Mr. Weldon's wishes. He was so courteous always, so considerate and kind.

I had learnt a good deal of my employer during the weeks I had been in his service: a stray bit of information from Mr. Jones, when he was in an expansive mood whilst taking his tea, a few words from Miss Rye who had a friend who had a cousin who knew Mr. Weldon, a chance remark from Mr. Weldon himself.

His early start had been bad. He was the fifth son of a poet whose health was only a little worse than his poetry. He was also selfish, for he shuffled his responsibilities, debts and unpublished poems on to a delicate wife, after calmly taking his own life. The five sons the poor widow might have been equal to dealing with, for they were good, honest lads, but the poems (in which she believed) proved too much for her; for, after their being "returned with thanks" by the ninth practical level-headed publisher, she also laid down her burden and departed from

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this vale of tears—pneumonia in her case, with much suffering. Not a lazy, sleep-yourself-away death after an overdose of morphia.

The sons brought themselves up to the best of their ability and drifted into business of some sort. One was an agent for sewing-machines, another designed book-covers for a well-known firm of publishers at a guinea apiece. Our Mr. Weldon was, by nature, a philanthropist, and for a time was secretary to the National Cripples' Help Society. Happening to write an article one day on "Christian Social Unionism," which some magazine accidentally published, it attracted the attention of Mr. Head. This was the man to champion the crusade against all the evils Mr. Head had set out to wipe off the face of the earth. He must be clever, enthusiastic, philanthropic and eclectic. The chief waved an Olympian hand and summoned Mr. Weldon to his presence. With a little sigh Mr. Weldon, who had the artistic temperament strongly developed, abandoned his desire for the rarefied life of those who live in cloudland, and tackled the Frangipanni system of treatment with much zeal. Patients afflicted with cancer flocked to the depot. Baron Frangipanni's name became a household word. The artistic temperament of the Baron's zealous exponent cropped up every now and again, but the patients were the gainers thereby. He saw them well, rid of disease, cleansed and made whole. And as he visioned them, so they saw themselves. A little imagination in conjunction with a little liver pill will work wonders in a universe becoming far too material and

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scientific. Imagination is sometimes more effective than a surgeon's knife.

Miss Rye's opinion of the "Vita" cure was identical with that of mother and the Cartons. She drew her salary for the management of its correspondence, but she didn't believe in it. Her friends, who were few, were kept in the dark as to what she was doing. Her permanent address was in a street in Westminster; there she was always to be found between the hours of six and ten p. m. As to her whereabouts during the day, that was nobody's business but her own.

"You are so adaptable," she observed one day when I rallied her upon her attitude towards her work.

"Which means I am not quite honest," I flared up with some heat.

She smiled inscrutably.

"Prove to me that Mr. Head and Mr. Weldon are not two of the straightest men in the world, and I will believe that the 'Vita' and 'Anti-alco' cures are gigantic frauds."

"Honest men can be mistaken."

"In reply to that, I will ask you why do the patients come, over and over again, for the remedies? Why is the fame of the cures effected by the treatment spreading all over the world?"

"The Christian Science cult flourishes," she remarked, with a yawn.

"And if you don't believe in it, I think you ought not to work for it," I said, disregarding her last observation.

"I quite agree with you," she responded, a great

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"Yes, *I* once was young and pretty. I daresay you'll hardly believe it?" There was a note of challenge in her voice, of hardness, of a bitter regret, which again moved me to pity.

"I can quite believe it," I said, gently. "You are attractive now, and you are still young. No one in these days is old."

"No one who has lived a life of leisure, of happiness. But those who have slaved and drudged. . . . You don't think I look hard and ugly, Miss Forrest?" Her eyes feverishly sought mine, and, turning, she seized my shoulder in a grip like steel.

"Indeed, no," I assured her, earnestly.

"I—I want to keep young," she murmured, brokenly, and, suddenly burying her face in her hands, she burst into tears.

For a moment I sat motionless, unable to move or speak, or utter the words of sympathy I longed to give. She was crying so pitifully, so hopelessly, with such complete abandonment. And I had been inclined to judge her as stoical, cynical, hard.

"Miss Rye," I whispered, at length, "I—I am so sorry for your trouble—whatever it is. Can't I help you?"

"Yes," she said, sitting up straight on the bench upon which we had been resting, and wiping away her tears. "You can, you are a woman, you are yet unspoiled by the world. You can give me your opinion upon a little matter. I—I must tell you a little story. It won't take long. There were two cousins once upon a time, a boy and a girl. He was some years older than the girl, and he was always very

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depression settling upon her. "But one must exist just a little longer."

And at her words pity flew to my heart, and I took her arm and gently pressed it. We were in St. James's Park, where we frequently walked after lunch, enjoying the scent of the freshly cut grass, the serenity after the turmoil of the streets; watching the children at play, and the ridiculous antics and wild splashings of the water-fowl in the lake.

Miss Rye and I had become fairly intimate. I liked her, and was sorry for her. She was so white and tired—one would have pronounced her apathetic but for the expectant, waiting look she always wore.

At the beginning of our acquaintance I found her reserved. She would discuss the budget and the poetry of the Renaissance, when she wouldn't tell you if her father was living, or her landlady had been drunk on the stairs the night before.

"You only work for pleasure. I only work to live," she said, not returning the pressure of my arm. "Do you know, Miss Forrest, I sometimes almost dislike you for your youth, and prettiness, and cocksureness."

My hand fell to my side. "I didn't know I was cocksure; it's only because I'm so happy. And I don't think I am pretty."

"Yes, you are. Only a girl who is pretty dare deny the fact; it is the ones who are doubtful about the point who keep quiet. I once was pretty, and young . . . "

I looked at the little dab-chicks diving in and out of the sparkling water, and waited for her to continue.

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good to her—kind, chivalrous, fighting her battles for her, taking care of her, for she was delicate and of a nervous disposition, and had no father or brothers of her own. They grew up, and insensibly drifted into love. Love”—she paused. “Miss Forrest, do you know what it is to love a man?”

“I—I don’t know,” I stammered, taken aback.

“Well, if ever you *do* love, you will know that it is the most beautiful, as well as the most exquisitely painful, emotion a human being can enjoy or suffer. Well, they drifted into love, the man constantly visited the girl; they walked and talked together; they read the same books. Their companionship was perfect. No reference was made to marriage, for the man was not in a position for the first few years. But the girl was quite happy, quite contented with his companionship, and the hope that lay before her. Then a time came when the man was in a good position, but still he did not speak of marriage. At first the girl was hurt, but eventually she began to realise that his duty lay in another direction for the present. There was a stumbling-block in the way, a stumbling-block that only death could remove. So she was content to wait yet a little longer. Then a time came when his visits to the girl became less frequent; he was abstracted in his manner; he said ‘yes’ when he should have said ‘no’; he was moody and sometimes depressed. And now a great fear fell upon the girl. She was no longer young, she was tired and dull after many years of work, she had lost her looks. Had the man ceased to love her? Had he grown tired of her?” Miss Rye stopped and, turning and fixing me with her great burning eyes

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in a long scrutiny, she repeated: "Had he ceased to love her? Tell me what you think?"

I sprang to my feet and, confronting her, asked: "Is the man a good man? An honourable, straight man?"

"Yes," said she. "There never lived a better man than Wen."

"Well, then," I cried, "he has not tired of her. He has not ceased to love her; he would not be so base. She has given him the best years of her life. He would not play her false. Good men are made of stronger, more endurable fibre. There will be a cause for his seeming indifference. The girl must have faith. I know a man, at this moment, who would *never* betray a girl—a good, strong man. There must be others. The girl must be a poor sort of creature if she doubted the man after his long years of faithful service. I would wait, I should be content to go on waiting through eternity for the man I loved."

"And I will wait," she broke in, a lovely colour rushing into her pale cheeks, a light into her sombre eyes. "I will wait without doubting, till he is ready. Thank you, Miss Forrest, for your comfort and help. A great load has been rolled from my heart. Like many another, I feared I was *going under*. Going under, after all the years I have worked. But now I believe, assuredly, that a day is not far distant when he will be able to come to me and say: 'Virginia, are you ready?' And I, without pride, for where there is great love there is no pride, will whisper back: 'I have always been ready. Always ready to close my typewriter, and remove the ink from my

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tired, stained fingers, and come to you.' ” Her voice dropped to a murmur. She had forgotten me. The love-light was in her eyes, her lips were curved in a happy smile. She was no longer a little, tired, drab typist in a dingy, black frock, and uninteresting black mushroom hat. She was no longer in St. James's Park, with the distant roar of London in her ears. She was away in Elysian fields, wandering hand in hand with her well-beloved. She visioned herself in white, her trailing garments brushing the dew from the sweet-scented clover, the song of a lark in her ears, the tire eternally gone from her face. Happiness lay before her, doubt and mistrust were left very far behind.

Now I understood the meaning of the waiting, expectant look; and unconsciously I prayed that he should never fail her.

CHAPTER XXIV

A GLIMPSE OF THE THAMES

JUNE gave place to July, and a great wave of heat descended upon London. The pavements scorched one's tired feet, the asphalt melted beneath the sun's fierce rays and exuded a hot, tarry smell, and people gasped in the windless air.

Miss Rye was as white as a sheet of note-paper, Mr. Jones's climbing feats were slow, and devoid of the dash and vim to which I had become accustomed, and Mr. Weldon ceased to run along the streets as was his usual habit, and was even known to go up the stairs to his room *one* at a time.

Things at Nottingham Place were not much brisker. Mrs. Brady's infectious laugh was quieter. Mr. Inglis made no attempt whatever at any kind of conversation, even refusing to discuss the state of the thermometer, and Mr. Pidge's appetite confined itself to one helping of everything, instead of two.

The Misses Sparrow did what they could to afford relief to their suffering boarders. Wet curtains hung in front of the street door. The sun-blinds were doused with water every two or three hours, salads on ice, and strawberries and cream tempted our faded appetites at every meal; and the Misses Sparrow themselves blossomed forth into girlish muslins which afforded grateful relief to sun-tired eyes. They

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were fearful, they confided to me, that they were much too old for such girlish attire, that it was unseemly for proprietresses of a boarding-house to garb themselves in anything but black or dark colours. But what were they to do? Black attracted the sun's rays more than anything else. . . . And when I said I should go about in nainsook night-dresses, if I were in their place and felt so disposed, they were a little shocked, but very relieved.

The only topics of conversation during the meals were the approaching holidays, the sea, the breezy hills. The foreigners were going to Folkstone, Ostend; Mrs. Brady to Scotland; Mr. Marple to Harrowgate to take the waters; Mrs. Darbyshire to visit a married daughter in Jersey; Mr. Pidge to Blackpool. And where was I going? Home. Oh, I had a home? Mr. Pidge ceased chewing lettuce while he put the question. Yes, I had a home and two whole parents. Mr. Pidge became gloomy, and wondered why the only girl in the house couldn't be a little more intelligent. He had practically washed his hands of me on the day he had discovered I was only a typist, which was two days after we had become acquainted with one another. Mr. Pidge enjoyed *The Family Herald* of an evening and, naturally, only desired to consort with heiresses in Park Lane. Women who earned their livings were not quite so—well, so hall-marked as those whose livings were earned by somebody else. Women who did nothing somehow acquired a manner, a bearing which was superior—Pidge thought; he couldn't explain . . . but all men of the world understood and

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appreciated it. And he brushed his top-hat lovingly and carefully with a velvet pad, and set his tie straight in front of the hall mirror, and caressed a curl which lay on his forehead, and turned up his trouser legs, and walked out of the door in *front* of me! but, of course, he might have been in a hurry, and I wasn't. No girl who had been brought up in bracing, breezy Ridgemoor could hurry through London when the thermometer registered ninety degrees in the shade. I was feeling the heat as much as anybody—perhaps more. Most of these people were accustomed to Summers in town, while I, for twenty-two years, had lived in the sharp air of the North, in the near neighbourhood of hills and cool rivers. But I would not admit, and scarcely knew, that physically I was limp and tired, for if my feet ached, my spirit seemed to float upon air, my soul soared away to cool heights dim and aloof from the world. And in no way did I attempt to analyse the reason for this curiously uplifted and exalted frame of mind. I was content, at the moment, just to live, to be, and to know that the world contained a man named Owen Westcott. I wanted, for the present, nothing different, no change in our relationship, nothing more than I already had. Simply his constant companionship, endless sympathy, and vigorous stimulating influence. For the tired, somewhat depressed Owen Westcott I first had known, had gone, vanished completely; and in his place was a man alert, strong, virile, confident, and, above all, as Lady Waterson had said, a man most attractively human in his weaknesses as well as his strength.

What were his weaknesses? I laughed as I re-

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flected upon them. His anxiety not to be considered "old." His irritability if people hustled or jostled him on the crowded pavements. His downright bad temper if, when on the river, he was bumped into by another boat, or the rowing community were on the wrong side of the stream.

Yes, I had been with him on the river, chaperoned by kind Lady Waterson, and I had enthused enough to please even him who wore a proprietary air towards all things connected with the Thames. *He* knew where the quiet, unfrequented backwaters were to be found, the peaceful haunts of kingfishers, dab-chicks, water-rats and lazy fat perch. And *he* knew of an express train down to Reading, and of Lady Waterson's great unselfishness and patience, and if Mr. Weldon wouldn't grant me a whole holiday, why, he was a swine of the first water!

There is nearly always a day in most people's lives which stands out clear and distinct from all other days in memory's storehouse. It may be a birthday, an engagement day, a wedding day, the day on which you first walked in the sunshine after your long illness, the day you left school to go home for your first holidays, the day you fought your first battle with the bully of that school, and came off victorious. Mine is the day on which I lay in a punt with Lady Waterson and Mr. Owen Westcott in a cool, green backwater at Sonning. How exquisite, how soothingly refreshing was the dim, green gloom of this quiet haunt after the heat and stress of London. They say I fell asleep, but it is a libel. Sleep! when I wouldn't for a kingdom have missed one delicious happy moment of one of the most per-

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fect days of my life. Late in the afternoon we made tea, and for a full half-hour Owen Westcott sat with knitted, anxious brow and stared at his kettle which was so loath to boil. It was generally such a quick amenable kettle, quite different from most tea-basket kettles! I offered him a hat-pin. "Prod the wick," I suggested. "We have to do that with our little spirit stove at the depot." And he prodded it with most happy results; and we enjoyed and laughed over our tea and scones like three children let loose from school.

When we left the dim recesses of the backwater it was to find that the river lay bathed in the golden radiance of the setting sun. Gold-flecked willow leaves kissed gold-dusted waters. A little brown-sailed boat turning the bend as lightly and gracefully as a brown bird on a sudden lost its dull-hued livery, a breath of wind had blown it into this warm, radiant reflection and it, too, took on a semblance of gold. Surely this was an enchanted country? Turning with dazzled eyes from all this burnished glory I encountered Mr. Westcott's grave scrutiny.

"Well?" he said, as he gently paddled the punt upstream, hugging the bank so closely that with a swish we drew past the green rushes and spiky reeds. "What do you think of old Father Thames?"

"It is too lovely," I sighed. "And at this moment I might be at home doing——"

"What?" asked Lady Waterson, with a smile.

"Oh, nothing. We won't talk or think of anything but this beautiful present. It is said that anticipation is better than realisation. Never did I imagine there could be anything half so beautiful on

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the river as that tangled mass of crimson ramblers drooping above the water we have just now passed. Did you observe how the sunset had changed their colour to a blood-red? Did you inhale their sweetness, Lady Waterson?"

"Why, you are becoming quite poetical!" she laughed.

"No, I am only bewitched. The river has cast a spell upon me."

"I don't think it's the river alone," she murmured, casting a look at Mr. Owen Westcott sitting in the stern of the punt. "I think it's——"

"Hush!" I said, devoutly hoping he hadn't heard her. And she laughed again and patted my hand.

Miss Rye visibly drooped as the heat continued. Her small face became even smaller, her hands more transparent, and her step more languid. From the white set features her great eyes shone like live coals, now burning it would seem with suppressed excitement, now mournful and dead as spent ashes. How was she faring? I wondered. Was she waiting contentedly and happily? With her eyes set steadfastly forward, trusting in the man she loved? Or had doubt, mistrust of him, again assailed her? Since that morning in St. James's Park she had neither, by word nor look, reopened the subject. Perhaps she regretted her momentary loss of self-control, of imparting her secret to me, of betraying her doubt of her lover to another woman. Over our lunch we discussed everyday topics, at our tea we talked of our work and the "Vita" and "Anti-alco" cures. And as the heat grew she spoke less and less, till a day came

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when she seemed even incapable of uttering a monosyllable. With a desire to cheer her, I rallied her on her aloofness, and invited her to share with me a basket of strawberries—a gift from the kind little Misses Sparrow. “You imagine me depressed when I am only melting. I am too hot to either speak or eat,” she said, pushing her bread and butter away from her, and fanning herself with a sheet of blotting-paper.

“Why, I live for this afternoon tea,” I responded. “I look forward to it steadily from two to four o’clock. And think of the holidays, Miss Rye, and cheer up. The depot will soon be closed, and you will be disporting yourself in the cool, fresh sea.”

“You are so annoyingly optimistic,” she said, petulantly. “A whole month has to be got through first, days of heat and languor, and an unquenchable thirst, which no ginger beer or iced lemon squash will assuage. How is it to be lived through, I ask?”

“Try some more tea,” I suggested, pushing the pot across the table, “and *do* have some strawberries. Whenever the boarders look hot and tired these days the Misses Sparrow say to each other: ‘Let’s give the poor things strawberries and cream.’ I wish you would come and live at Nottingham Place, Miss Rye. You wouldn’t be so—lonely,” I suggested.

“I infinitely prefer my rooms and smuts and outlook upon chimneys to any boarding-house,” she said, a little ungraciously, “and I am not lonely.”

“Of course you have plenty of pleasant things to dwell upon, to think about?” I said, tentatively.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“I was thinking of your—lover, of—of your ap-

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proaching marriage.” Somehow I had a sudden tremendous wish to discuss love and marriage with Miss Rye. “I hope you will forgive my mentioning him to you, that you will not think me impertinent, but I should so like to hear some more about your—fiancé. It would be so refreshing—a love affair—after all the drunkards, and disease, and misery. Won’t you satisfy my curiosity, Miss Rye?”

A beautiful colour flew to her pale cheeks.

“You are already tired of your work?”

“Indeed, no! But a little change is always pleasant.”

A smile flitted across her lips. “There is not much to tell. He, then, has eyes, a nose and a mouth—the same as most men. And he is moderately tall, and broad, and clean-shaven.”

I nodded my head approvingly. He sounded rather like a man with whom *I* was acquainted.

“Yes, and where did he propose to you? Was it on the river?” I asked, eagerly. “The river would be nice——”

She rose suddenly and walked to the window, turning her back to me, and my sentence remained unfinished, for I feared I had offended her. Softly gathering the cups and saucers together on a tray ready for Billy, I was preparing to leave the room when she said, still with her back to me: “No, it was not on the river. It wasn’t anywhere—specially. Perhaps you won’t understand if love has not yet entered into your life, but we—he and I—have never actually spoken of our feelings towards one another. To me, love seems too delicate, too exquisite an emotion to speak of in our common language. One wants the

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poetry of the wind, of the sea, of gently rustling corn. To speak of love in our harsh tongue would be, to me, as though one with a rough piece of pumice-stone had removed the down from a butterfly's wings, or scratched away the soft bloom from the cheek of the peach. We know that we love one another and with that we are content." Now she turned about and looked at me smilingly. "Perhaps you think me sentimental, Miss Forrest?"

I shook my head and marvelled at the change my feelings had undergone not to think her sentimental. "There was a time," I said, "and only a very short time ago, when I *should* have thought you foolish; when I regarded the independence of women as the most glorious state that one could conceive for them. But now—well, I rather like men," I finished, a little lamely.

"Yes," she agreed; "they *are* nice—some of them."

"Tell me," I said. "Has it all come right between you and your—man? Has he been to see you?"

"Yes," she replied. "He came the night after our conversation. He said he knew he had been neglecting me, but something had been worrying him very badly, and he knew he was only fit for his own society, and that I must forgive him for his selfishness. And he was so sweet, and kind, and sympathetic that I wondered how I could ever have doubted him. 'And has the worry departed?' I asked. 'Yes,' he replied, 'or rather it is going, I hope. The jade Fortune has been giving me the deuce of a time, but now she is going to smile upon me, I verily believe.' "

"And what was the trouble?"

"I don't know," she replied. "I never enquired."

A GLIMPSE OF THE THAMES

I looked at her in surprise. "I shall want to know about *everything* concerning my lover if I am ever engaged," I observed. "All his joys, and worries, and debts, and bilious attacks, and sports, and books—in fact, *everything*."

"And I only want to know what he wishes to tell me," she said, softly.

"You ought to have lived in the East. You would have made a beautiful Mohammedan wife."

"I shall be just as satisfactory as an English one," she retorted, returning to her typewriter. And thoughtfully I descended the stairs to the depot.

Miss Rye constantly spoke of her lover after this, and her confidence I eagerly encouraged. Love to me had become a most entertaining subject of conversation.

CHAPTER XXV

AN INVITATION TO A RIVER PARTY, AND A CHAT ON FROCKS

THE heat continued. My little bedroom, so close to the roof, resembled an airless oven, and at night I lay outside my bed, close to the widely opened window, rarely catching a wink of sleep till that hour before the dawn when the air is the purest and the breezes the freshest of any in the twenty-four.

A letter from Lady Waterson one sultry morning came as an oasis in an arid desert, for it contained an invitation to a river party. My temperature came down as I read it; I found strength to hand the tomatoes to the importunate Mr. Pidge, and I smiled at a well-worn joke of Mr. Marple. With unusual briskness I jumped on to a moving 'bus, and so charming and sympathetic was my manner towards the "Vita" patients that I believe one or two almost fell in love with me.

All the morning, as I sat over my typewriter, I visioned myself gliding through cool water, listening to the swish of the reeds, watching the green reflection of willows. Lady Waterson had mentioned the word "launch," but my brain refused to see anything but "punt." A punt was so perfectly restful, its progress through the water was so lingering and

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lazy. Over its sides one could dabble fingers in the limpid stream, or play with the flowers on the sloping grassy banks. A man in white flannels showed to such advantage when wielding a punt-pole; a girl reclining in the bow, dressed in—why, what should she be dressed in? I sat and stared helplessly at my Remington. I had nothing to wear. My cottons were already faded, the pink organdie was limp and depressed as a wet umbrella. My purse contained less than ten shillings. For five full minutes I stared at the typewriter, then I wrote the following letter:

“DEAR FATHER: Do you think it would be possible for you to appropriate a couple of pounds from mother? She never discovered the loss of the sovereign you gave me, did she? I require the money most urgently. So please send on at once to

“Your loving daughter,

“HILARY.”

A couple of days later I received the following reply:

“MY DEAR HILARY: I have only succeeded in getting a sovereign from your mother. I got up early this morning, when she was asleep, and took it from her purse which lay on the dressing-table. She discovered the loss at about eleven o'clock this morning, and since then the whole place has been turned upside down, and Ellen has given notice to leave; but I don't think she means it seriously. In addition to the sovereign I am sending you five shillings, which I happened to have by me. While your mother is en-

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gaged with her hand down the back of the drawing-room couch, searching for the sovereign, I am going to post this letter. We are looking forward to seeing you shortly. I am proud of my enterprising girl, and your grandmother thinks more than a little of you.

"Your affectionate father,

"ANTONY FORREST."

Three times during the day I read and laughed at this delightful epistle. I pictured dear father's anxious rueful countenance as he crept out of bed and purloined the sovereign, his head turned mother's way, his eyes on her sleeping face, his night-shirt flapping round his thin legs.

"What's the joke?" said Mr. Jones from behind the screen. "Funny letters from the dipsomaniacs?"

"No," I replied, "a funny letter from my father." Mr. Jones came from behind his cup. "What is your father?"

"What is he?" I repeated, vaguely.

"Yes. What's his business?"

"He's a zoölogist, and knows more about sponges than any man living," I returned, with some pride.

Mr. Jones looked sorry for my father. "But what does he make his money out of?" he persisted.

"He doesn't make any."

Mr. Jones now looked sympathetic. He evidently thought I kept my entire family.

"Been unsuccessful in business?"

"He's never been in business."

Mr. Jones said "Oh!" or rather "Mo!" for his mouth was full of bread and butter. After that he abandoned my father. A man who had never made

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any money, or never been into business, was unworthy of consideration. He climbed up his chair to his desk, observed it was hot, and wrote a scathing letter to Mrs. Finch-Smith; while I, in a letter to a Mr. Deddicot, expressed my regret that he should have again fallen into intemperate habits, and agreed with him in thinking that the unusually hot weather might partly account for an unusually fierce thirst. And that if he at once began to take some "Anti-alco" (which I was sending on that day), in conjunction with lime-juice and soda-water, I ventured to hope relief would be afforded.

Our pens were leisurely travelling across our envelopes when a man with peculiar movements swayed into the depot and stared vacantly at Mr. Jones. Leaving my work, I walked down the room, and, standing behind the table-counter, asked what I could do for him.

"I want to spreak to the ghentleman," he said, with a thickened utterance.

"Perhaps you mean Mr. Weldon?" I suggested.

"Perhaps I do," he agreed, and I rang the bell for Billy to tell Mr. Weldon that he was wanted downstairs. But in a few moments I learned that Mr. Weldon was out.

"Can I do anything for you?" I asked.

"I want to ask, I want to know about this—about this here dr—drink cure"—he clutched at the table. "P-raps you don't know"—with a foolish smile—"that I am a bit drunk now."

"Yes. It is most obvious," I replied. "I am afraid, if I explained the treatment to-day, you wouldn't understand. So I will just give you some

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pamphlets on the subject, and you can read them when you are better." I could hear Mr. Jones sniggering behind his hand.

"Yes," he grinned, "give me some pamphlets; I like reading. I'm very fond of reading."

Selecting some suitable literature in the shape of leaflets and letters from cured grateful patients, I handed them to him, and he promptly dropped them upon the floor, and in endeavouring to pick them up he toppled over himself, and seemed quite unable to regain his balance.

"He is too big for me," said Mr. Jones, regarding him thoughtfully; "we must ring for Billy's help."

"I am going," I cried suddenly, nauseated. "Put these pamphlets in his pockets, and don't hurt him." I fled to Mr. Weldon's room, and sat with my face buried in my hands for some minutes, trying to shut out the foolish, red, bloated face of the man down below. How pitiful it was that a human being should fall so low! Radiantly happy but a few minutes earlier, I was now depressed beyond words. Two of the test cases had broken down: one of the three women had escaped the surveillance of the nurse in charge and had been discovered hopelessly drunk on the doorstep of the home. The solicitor had run away. Could nothing be done to stamp out this evil? Tony had said it was mainly a question of climate. Induce the sun to shine, reduce the rainfall, wipe out the fogs, and the traffic in drink would be reduced to one-half. The Eastern nations were temperate, not through their religion, but through their climate. If Mr. Head could transport his

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drunkards to Egypt, say, they would turn from spirit as they now turned from water. But here my argument began to weaken. The sun had shone steadily for nineteen days, and it was during that period the two test cases had succumbed to their weakness, and Mr. Deddicot had broken down, and the man I had just left . . . and the Eastern nations drank hashish, and were opium eaters—I gave it up as hopeless, and glanced at the clock. Half-past five. These Summer days were very long, and the dining-room at Nottingham Place would be very hot. I had told the Misses Sparrow I might not be in to dinner. I would go down to Bedford Park and consult practical Juanita as to the likeliest shop at which a satisfactory river frock could be purchased for the sum of £1 5s.

The Cartons were discovered under the cherry-tree in the dainty green garden at the back of the house. Cousin Janet, mountainous in a befrilled holland gown, was working the squares of a pantry towel with bright magenta silk. No sooner was one bazaar disposed of than Cousin Janet manfully conjured up another from somewhere. It might be at Ealing or Peckham Rye; it might be for a Uganda missionary, or a home-grown curate, Cousin Janet cared not. She was broad-minded and of a helpful disposition. Her cocoa-tins and rolling-pins were scattered broadcast with unstinted lavishness. Pantry towelling duchess sets journeyed to Deptford, and melon seed necklaces descended upon Dulwich.

Juanita, in a brown flowered muslin, reclined on a rug with her head against Dorothea's knee. In her pleasant, lazy voice she read *Christabel* aloud, to

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which nobody paid the smallest attention. But such lapse of good manners in no way ruffled her perfect equanimity. Dorothea always said that her sister would read or sleep composedly through an earthquake and receive no damage. Tony, I include him in the Carton family, for he was apparently a fixture at Warraby, in a startling purple shirt and green flannel suit, reclined in a hammock chair and stared at Juanita, and Dorothea was trimming a rather faded blue chip hat.

"Hilary!" they cried, as I appeared through the drawing-room and descended the steps to the lawn.

"Don't anybody move," I said. "It's too hot. Cousin Janet, I have ventured to ask Belinda to bring me a long drink of something."

"Come and sit by me," said Juanita, "there's room for two. We are charmed to see you, but whatever's brought you here such a broiling evening?"

"I want your advice about a new frock. I'm going to a party."

"A new frock!"

"Well, I do get one occasionally. You needn't be so startled, Dorothea. You are having a new hat, I see—from courtesy, we'll call it new."

Dorothea chuckled. "Don't you think it will be nice? Only eleven-three for all the trimmings?" She held up a wisp of tulle and some depressed forget-me-nots.

"I'll tell you when it's finished," I replied, guardedly.

"How exciting the prospect of a new frock! I love planning out frocks. Where's the party, Hilary? Excuse my back, but if I turn round I shall

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see Tony's shirt, and the colour hurts me," said Juanita.

"At Lady Waterson's—a river party."

"There you are," said Tony, gloomily. "If I had succeeded in finding work, no one would have asked me to river parties."

"Don't interrupt," commanded Juanita. "What sort of a frock did you think of having?"

"Well, it's this way"—and I proceeded to tell her of the state of my finances, my letter to father, the small amount he had succeeded in procuring, and what I proposed to do if the sum of twenty-five shillings was insufficient to buy a suitable and beautiful garment.

Cousin Janet laid down her work. "You want to get credit at Peter Robinson's," she said, with a little gasp.

I told her that her conclusion as to my meaning was correct.

She shook her head. "It would never do," she pronounced. "It would be the beginning of the end."

Now this was the first time I had ever heard Cousin Janet resemble mother, and I asked her what she meant. "The beginning of what?"

"Your downfall, of course," said Juanita. And Dorothea laughed so much that all the pins fell out of her mouth.

"I require new gloves, shoes, stockings and a hat. My last year's crinoline got wet, and its present shape resembles a straw bee-hive," said I. "If you will explain how I am to procure these articles, as well as a frock, out of twenty-five shillings, I shall be glad. The only way I can see is to open an ac-

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count at one of the big shops and give Cousin Janet's name as a guarantor."

I was unprepared for Cousin Janet jumping so high. Even stout people can be athletic when occasion demands.

"It is not that I should mind, Hilary," she said, when her scissors, thimble and magenta silks had been restored to her. "I should be glad to do it for you, but what would your mother say?"

I closed my eyes as I thought of what mother would say, and the thought was so painful that I dismissed it at once.

"You are right, Cousin Janet," I said, heroically. "All right things are disagreeable." And for a moment I wondered why they all roared with laughter. "What I mean is"—I corrected myself—"to do right is always disagreeable. I'll go in my old frock, and stockings with holes, and shoes with patches, and hat like a bee-hive."

"No, you won't," said Juanita, suddenly springing to her feet. "Thea, my green muslin!"

"Well, what about it?" said Dorothea, crossly. "You've ruined my hat, jumping about like that, Nita. Look at it."

"I'm sorry," said Juanita. "It does look a bit dissipated. But I was so excited about the green frock."

"Do you mean the one Aunt Mary Hannah gave you?"

"Yes."

"And which makes you look like a yellow hen?"

"Exactly," said Juanita, delightedly. "It would be the very thing for Hilary—for her river party."

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She'd look delightful in it. Come along." She seized my arm and dragged me across the lawn and into the house, and up the stairs to her room. "You've got a colour, you see. I don't know what I wouldn't give to possess pink cheeks." She dived into a wardrobe and produced a long, fat night-dress. "I keep my light things in old night-dresses. It preserves them from dust, and I put a draw-string top and bottom. There, what do you think of that?"

"I think it's sweet," I replied, with fervour.

Juanita threw out the delicate green draperies of the frock and trailed it up and down the room. "It's yours," she said.

"Never."

"But it is."

"I could never accept it."

"Rubbish! It's no use to me. I shall never wear it again. I look a hundred in it, and ugly as sin."

"But it's made-over silk." I fingered the white taffeta foundation reverently.

Juanita laughed. "Have you never worn a silk underskirt?"

"Never. Only a satin one made out of an old dress of mother's."

"Well, you shall begin now."

"I couldn't. It's worth pounds—the whole frock."

"And you'll look delicious in it—a cool, green sprite."

I started violently. Somebody had said that before to me. It was Mr. —

"What's the matter? Your cheeks have gone crimson."

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"The room is very hot," I stammered.

Juanita looked at me searchingly. "Hilary Forrest, is that man going to be at Lady Waterson's river party?"

"I don't know. And—I am not going to be cross-questioned," I said, sharply.

She burst out laughing, and then she kissed me. "See!" she cried, gaily, holding the soft, delicate muslin against my face, "see how it suits you. Look at yourself in the mirror. Hilary, what colour *are* your eyes? blue or green or purple?"

"I don't know and I don't care," I said, sitting down upon the bed. "Juanita, I didn't come here to cadge. I only wanted your advice."

She threw up her hands, and, with a little sigh, said: "Proud, obstinate, never-accept-a-kindness people are my pet aversion."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, if you will allow it. I will hire the frock for the day. Miranda and I always used to do that when we were at a pinch. We paid each other sixpence for the loan of a best blouse, and threepence for a white petticoat."

"What a lovely idea!" she laughed. "Very well. What do you wish to pay me?"

"Five shillings."

"No, that is too much," she protested. "Say half-a-crown."

"It's too little"—but she was wrapping the frock up in soft folds of tissue paper and refused to discuss the matter further.

When I said "Good-bye" to her, before my departure, she whispered: "You'll come and tell me all

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about the party, and—if anything happens, anything of importance.”

“Do you mean if I fall out of the boat?”

“No, I don’t,” she returned. “I mean——”

“Good-night,” I cried. “I shall miss my train, and many thanks for the frock.”

CHAPTER XXVI

I LEARN THE NAME OF MISS RYE'S LOVER

JUANITA had asked me to tell her if anything of importance happened at Lady Waterson's river party.

Well, I might have gone to her and said: "I went the happiest, lightest-hearted girl in the world to that river party, and I returned from it the most sorrowful."

And she would have put kind arms around me and offered me sympathy which I felt I could stand from no one but Miranda, for only my sister would understand.

So to Miranda I fled. Returning to Ridgemoor just as some of my friends had predicted I should return, tired, disillusioned, sick in body and mind, and desiring nothing but to be allowed to lie in peace beneath the kindly shade of the beech tree, with the music of the water in my ears.

But I want to tell the story of that Sunday without any heroics, without any words of self-pity. Just a plain, unvarnished story, exactly as everything happened.

The morning was perfect, a tiny breeze tempered the great heat, and by ten o'clock I was ready to start for Richmond. Was I vain to keep taking parting peeps at myself in the hall mirror while I

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drew on my new white gloves? Was I foolish to listen with such real enjoyment to the Misses Sparrow and Mrs. Brady's appreciation of my airy, green muslin, and beflowered shady hat which Mrs. Brady herself had trimmed? Did I behave like a silly school-girl when I smiled vacuously on catching Mr. Inglis and even Pidge taking covert peeps at me from behind the drawing-room door? Yes, I was both vain and foolish; I was distinctly conscious of my feminine weaknesses as, picking up my train, I sailed along the street to the station. But I cared not—I was in a perfectly happy, daring, reckless mood. I was going to enjoy myself, to meet pleasant, lively people, and to see Mr. Owen Westcott. And at the thought of the last I gave a little laugh of pleasure, and a little skip. For a whole day I was going to be in the near neighbourhood of this extremely nice, grave, interesting man—not tired now; he had ceased to be tired; but one still knocked up against his grave moods every now and again, and one still felt it a duty to endeavour to dispel this gravity.

For a whole day he and I would move through cool water, feasting our eyes on Summer loveliness, chatting, arguing or indulging in those silences which are so sweet to friends who are in perfect sympathy with one another.

Would he be at Baker Street Station, waiting for me? But of course he was. Wasn't he always waiting for me somewhere in these days? And had I not ceased to wonder why?

He stood outside the booking office—tall, cool in a flannel suit and Panama hat, and smiling a welcome upon me.

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"I thought you would go by this train," he said, as he took the tickets.

"What remarkable perspicacity," I laughed. "It's the only one if we are to be at Witty's ferry by half-past eleven."

"Of course it is," he replied, brilliantly. "Have you observed the beauty of the day, Miss Hilary?"

"I have been observing nothing else since I got up. It is ideal. Sunshine in abundance, a cool west wind, perfect blue sky flecked with wee white mackerel clouds. What more could one wish for?"

"Not much," said he, as he followed me into a carriage. "Miss Hilary, may I tell you how charming you look—as charming as the morning itself."

"That is prettily spoken," said I. "I *do* feel rather nice to-day." I patted my skirts. "I have hired this frock for the day from my Cousin Juanita for half-a-crown. Cheap, isn't it?"

He leant back against the cushions, and gave one of his painful laughs.

"It is nothing to laugh at. Wait till you have tried to dress on nothing a year." And I proceeded to give him an account of father's appropriation of the sovereign, of mother's agitation and her search for it down the insides of couches, and of the servants giving notice to quit. And he was an amused and interested listener.

"And you would really prefer being in this—hard-up condition, working for your living, writing to dipsomaniacs, slaving through the heat of the day, to being at home in the lap of luxury? Sitting in the beautiful garden you have so often described,

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leading a life of well-bred respectability, such as a descendant of the great house of Allardyce ought to lead?" he queried, a flicker of amusement in the grave eyes.

"I never lived in the lap of luxury. There were always fearful and depressing things, like gas and coal bills, meeting you at every turning of life. And I detested an existence of well-bred, feminine, narrow respectability. I wouldn't return to it for untold wealth. And you know I wouldn't, Mr. Westcott."

"No," he replied, "I don't think you would. I have never before met anyone with such an insatiable desire for work."

"Mother would fall dumb from amazement were she to hear anybody give vent to such an extraordinary opinion," I laughed. "'Hilary industrious?' she would cry, labouredly, when speech had returned to her. 'Hilary fond of work! Why, surely the world is all topsy-turvy if the man exists who considers Hilary industrious.' It is difficult to make parents take us at our true worth. Mother is in a chronic state of astonishment at her ever having brought such a child into the world, Mr. Westcott. My sisters, Miranda and Mick, are eminently satisfactory as children; they are hers without a doubt, a beautiful blend of Allardyce and Forrest. But I, surely, must be all Forrest, for am I not wicked? A child begotten of one parent, and that parent not herself."

Mr. Westcott removed his hat, crossed his legs, with my permission lit a cigarette, and made sundry other preparations towards an enjoyable half-hour.

"Yes," he said. "You were saying——?"

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"That is all," I replied. "You must entertain me to-day. I am tired of talking."

He looked at me in such incredulous astonishment that I bit my lip to strangle my laughter.

"It must be the new dress," said he, at length, "or a symptom of impending illness."

I shook my head. "No," I said, "it is simply from a desire to be unselfish. You shall talk to-day. You cannot be interested in my family."

"It is strange perhaps," he returned, with tremendous seriousness, though his lips twitched, "that no family has so absorbingly interested me as yours, Miss Hilary. It seems to hold a peculiar fascination for me. Your mother, your father, your grandmother, Miss Miranda, Miss Mick, each in turn becomes a fascinating study."

"Really?" I said, doubtfully, trying to read his countenance.

"Really," he asseverated. "And I think your grandmother interests me most of all. You may say you are a Forrest, but I should imagine you closely resemble your grandmother in more ways than one."

"Resemble grandmother!" This alarming proposition caused me to sit bolt upright on the seat, and to drop my parcel and handkerchief.

He rescued them, while quietly wondering what I did when there was nobody handy to restore my lost property to me.

"I manage quite well, thank you," I said, with dignity. "To liken any girl to a grandmother such as mine is enough to upset her balance."

"I meant it as a compliment," he assured me, quick-

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ly. "You say she is singularly honest, generous, proud——"

"And has a temper simply diabolic," I interrupted.

"Well, yours," he began; but, meeting my eye, quickly stopped; and then we both laughed.

"Miss Hilary"—he paused.

"Yes," said I.

"You remember that night when"—he looked through the window.

"Yes?"

"When I imagined you thought something you didn't think?"

"This is a conundrum," I said, resignedly, wiping my brow.

"Do you still not think it?" he cried eagerly, ignoring my interruption.

"I am not sure that I know what you mean. One's brain works slowly on a hot day," I said, nervously.

"About my being old—seventeen years older than you. You said—you wouldn't mind if I were a hundred." He swept round suddenly, fixing me with grave, questioning eyes.

"Why—you've not arrived at that already?" I cried flippantly, trying to hide the tremour in my voice.

"Don't joke, Hilary," he implored on a sudden, strangely serious. "I—can't stand it any longer. I must say—something to you to-day. I have waited—a lifetime——"

"Mr. Westcott, we are at Richmond. Won't you wait a little longer? The porters are staring at us," I implored, my heart beating wildly and suffocatingly.

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"Damn the porters!" he burst out, savagely. "Forgive me, but you are always putting me off"—he was helping me out of the carriage as he spoke. "Always you tell me to wait when I want to speak of——"

"Mr. Westcott, the station is crowded"—I was rapidly pushing my way through throngs of people. Unexpectedly he laughed. "You'll have a policeman after you in a minute if you behave in such frenzied fashion." He signalled to the driver of a hansom, and bade me get in. For a moment I hesitated. "You might as well," he observed, a little grimly. "It must be either here or on the river."

"Oh, on the river—if—if it must be. But why, Mr. Westcott—you were so nice and practical the first part of the journey. Why——"

"Has my guard broken down?" he said. "I will tell you, if you will get in. There"—he took his place beside me, and for a moment closed his eyes and compressed his lips. Then he turned and smiled at me. "You needn't be nervous, Miss Hilary. You chose the river; till then I am simply your devoted—friend. But, as a friend, may I tell you, dispassionately, when a man's guard is sometimes weakened? I take your silence for consent." He was gazing through the window, straight in front of him. "Sometimes it is when the object of his affection is down on her luck. When she is weary, tired, ill, and needs, though in her pride she doesn't know it, support, sympathy and help. Then a man's armour of self-control becomes very weak. He has to bite his lips and clench his hands to keep back the torrent of words that well-nigh overwhelm him: the words of love, the desire to help and take care of her. And

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sometimes it is when, in all her splendour of youth, she is unusually beautiful and gay, unusually daring and high-spirited, unusually provocative and alluring. When she garbs herself in green array, when the blood sings through her veins, and laughter sparkles in her eyes; when she is, in short, a maddening, dancing will-o'-the-wisp; why, then a man becomes very weak. For, after all, he is but a man, and not a superior archangel."

Once more he turned and smiled upon me. "Are you going to be very kind to me—on the river, little Hilary?"

"What do you think?" I asked, trying to gain time as we were nearing the path leading down to the ferry.

"I believe you are," he said, very gently.

"I wonder," I whispered, with my face averted—"and there are the Watsons waving to us from the launch." But it was not to us—it was to a perspiring footman who had to tear home for some lobsters which had been forgotten.

I feel pretty well convinced, on looking back, that a coal magnate from South Wales, whom Lady Waterson introduced to me as I stepped on board the "Lotus Land," deemed me more than a little mad during the two hours' conversation I had with him. Partly was it my own fault, for I was abstracted and jumpy, and chiefly was it his, for he expounded to me the Monroe Doctrine, tariff reform, the scheme for relieving national aged paupers—or was it a national scheme for aged paupers?—his views on the disestablishment of the Welsh Church, Celtic

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poetry, Mr. Lloyd-George, and Sunday-closing of public houses.

At Mr. Lloyd-George my thoughts had wandered to Owen Westcott, who sat in the bow of the launch with a monumental lady in white. How infinitely more attractive was he, in his grave abstraction, than noisy Mr. Lloyd-George, or this coal man.

"I am afraid you are not listening," said the coal man, in the patient voice of one who addresses an inattentive child.

"Oh, yes," I hastened to assure him.

"What was I saying?" (with smiling badinage).

"You were speaking of Mr. Lloyd-George and—public houses."

"But what about them?" (Now an admonishing finger was raised.)

"Oh, I—I came to this launch party in order to enjoy myself, not to be put through a catechism on the political, artistic and economic aspect of Wales," I said, suddenly breaking into anger.

The coal man sat and stared at me in such mute astonishment that instantly I was ashamed of myself.

"I am sorry," I stammered. "It is most kind of you to endeavour to amuse and entertain me, but—but, for some unaccountable reason, my thoughts will wander. I had a somewhat unusual experience coming down to Richmond to-day—perhaps that will account for my inattention. Please forgive me. And—isn't the river beautiful?"

"I don't particularly care about these lower reaches—too crowded," he said, a trifle sharply. "When we get to Sunbury and Shepperton we can

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begin to look about us. There is Sir John summoning us to lunch. Excuse me, I—I——”

“You want to go down with somebody else, and I don’t wonder,” I said, smilingly. “Don’t let me detain you, Sir David Morgan, and I hope your next companion will be more amusing and a better listener. Thank you, I am going down with this gentleman,” I concluded, as Owen Westcott came hurrying across the deck. And, with a relieved air, the coal magnate trotted down to the saloon.

We followed him in more leisurely fashion. Already the table was crowded with a happy summery set of people. Sir John Waterson, attired in a grey and purple flannel suit, with a green linen shirt and turned-down, soft collar, was busily dissecting and distributing the lobsters which had so nearly been left behind. Six cock-lobsters and three hen—he had chosen them himself, for he was a judge of lobsters, he explained to anybody who cared to listen.

Heated servants handed salmon mayonnaise and prawns in aspic. The old butler, at the end of the saloon, drew corks from champagne bottles with mathematical precision. My old friend, the sub-editor, was still worrying round about Ibsen. His friendly smile conveyed to me the fact that he dared venture upon such recognition as the width of a table divided us; also that the red-haired girl to whom he was talking was much more soulful than I. A pleasant German Countess talked of her garden and her pigs to an ascetic, pallid young curate. The coal magnate had fastened himself upon Lady Waterson, who, clad in cool, grey muslin, sat a polite

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listener to a dissertation on Scottish small holdings or something equally deadly uninteresting.

Owen Westcott and I talked platitudes and little enough of those. For, though my nervousness had now vanished, the tremendous moments which lay before me, and upon which I knew he was dwelling, filled the whole of my mental horizon. What would he say? And my heart throbbed as I imagined his words, for Owen Westcott would be no lover of milk and water calibre. And what should I say? My cheeks flushed as the confession of my love, which he would force from me, spelt itself out in my brain. And I was glad to be cornered at last—glad that this strong man's guard had broken down? That our friendship must end, and—courtship begin? Turning, I stole a look at him. Should I be glad? And, as I looked, his eyes met mine; and into them rushed such an expression of love, and hope, and trust, that my own fell abashed.

"You mustn't look at me like that," I whispered low, "or—people will guess——"

"Guess what?" he banteringly queried.

"Oh, you're unkind," I murmured.

"Never," he said.

"Please pass the salt."

"You are eating a meringue."

"If I choose to eat salt with a meringue——"

"Oh, certainly." And I refused to take the slightest heed of the smile that crept to his lips.

"You are unkind not to talk," I said, presently. "Sir David Morgan was telling me all sorts of interesting things about Celtic poetry, and—Mr. Lloyd-

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George." I am sorry to relate here that Mr. Owen Westcott spluttered into his serviette.

"Those are not party manners," I observed, coldly; "and I should be glad of some cream with my strawberries. No, Sir John, I am not being in the least amusing. Mr. Westcott is laughing at a joke of his own."

"Let's have it, Westcott," cried Sir John Water-son, in his big, hearty voice. "It must be very funny to amuse you."

The conversation, to my relief, now became general. Sir John recited amusing stories, and cracked jokes. The Ibsen sub-editor told a yarn, the point of which nobody saw. And a fair young man to my right informed me that he was an author, and hadn't I guessed it from his face, and would I like to hear the names of his most successful titles—the titles that sold his books?

I replied that such a recital would afford me the deepest pleasure, and he rapidly ran through them, punctuating each with a rap of a spoon on his plate. *The Blood That Drips*. "Eight thousand copies went in a month," he said, with pardonable pride. *Wallowing Swine*. *The House with a Thousand Eyes*. "What was that about?" I enquired, with deep interest. "Read it," said this successful author. "It is to be procured at all booksellers." *Firearms and the Woman*. *The Life Choked Out*. *Blood-stained Fingers*.

"Oh!" I shuddered. "They are rather creepy titles."

"You think so, do you?"

"Indeed, yes. Were they published in *The Family*

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Herald?" He drew himself up. "They have appeared in one of our greatest daily periodicals," he said, in a crushing voice. And I was glad that Lady Waterson rose at that instant, for I could think of nothing soothing by way of reply, and dared not enquire if, by "one of our greatest periodicals," he meant to imply *The Daily Mail*.

Arrived on deck, we split up into various groups. There was the intellectual group presided over by the sub-editor and the author of the gory titles. Impartially they discussed Plato, Victor Hugo, Marie Corelli, Goethe, Owen Seaman and Shakespeare. From fragments of conversation wafted across the deck, I gathered they were a little crushing in their estimation of the lady. She was so elemental. If only she was immoral, something might be left to her. At this point I turned my back. Surely there was something wrong here. The nature group proved a little more amusing. The German Countess told Owen Westcott all about her herbaceous border and the newest method of exterminating slugs. Soot round lettuces was of no avail, salt and carrots were a sheer waste of time. "Oh!" said Owen, politely interested, "I haven't a garden, but information is always useful." The Countess was pleased, and dilated further on slug-killing. A long-bearded gentleman informed a gentleman without one that he had succeeded in growing water-cress on land, and roses in his hot-air cupboard. A lady in sandals explained how she had lived on vegetables and fruits in a tent for six months and gained weight. A suggestion that the extra weight had not added to her charms everyone tried to keep out of their faces.

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The political group, with Sir David Morgan as principal speaker, touched upon topics one's only aim in life was to forget. I felt if they uttered another word about the redrafting of an Education Bill I should shriek.

"You are very quiet," said Lady Waterson, standing in front of me.

"I want to look at the river and—things."

"So do I." And she sat down beside me. "It is good sometimes only to look at the eternal trinity of earth, and sky, and water."

Later in the afternoon Owen Westcott came to us with cups of tea, and humbly craved leave to join us.

"Have you been working very hard?" asked Lady Waterson, with her kindly smile, making room for him beside her. "I noticed that you were talking to Sir David Morgan just now."

"Oh, no; he was talking to me."

She laughed. "You are not a good society man, Owen. I heard you heave a deep sigh when Miss Blumington was explaining Bach to you."

"I am sorry," he said, contritely.

"And you have offered us tea without cream and sugar, and nothing to eat. No, don't bother." She signed to a servant. "Save your energy for taking an intelligent interest in Miss Forrest's and my conversation. We are on our pet theme: the position of working-women."

He checked a groan.

"That is not polite," said she, with a twinkle. "Surely, you are interested in women who work?"

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"In one." And he looked brazenly at me.

"And there is your Cousin Virginia. You are forgetting her."

"Virginia Rye!" I started so violently that I nearly upset my tea. "Virginia Rye is your cousin?"

"Why, yes," said he. "Do you know her?"

"Know her. I should think I do. I see her nearly every day of my life. She manages the 'Vita' correspondence for Mr. Weldon. Why——" I stopped abruptly, and sat staring at him. What did this mean? What mystery was I about to unfold? My brain was working slowly.

"But she works at a private bank," he said.

"She left it two months ago." I spoke mechanically. I was busy with my thoughts. My brain was working a little faster. Her lover was a cousin——

"You must be mistaken. She would have told me. She tells me everything," he was saying, calmly.

"No, no. She is ashamed of her connection with the depot. She terms Baron Frangipanni a quack. She bade me speak of her to nobody. Mr. Westcott——the sharpness of my voice startled me——"has she any other cousins who are——doctors? Anyone but you?"

"No, I am her only cousin." He and Lady Water-son were staring at me now.

"And"—I grasped the railing in front of me—"does she——does she——call you Wen?"

I closed my eyes before he spoke, closed them tightly, as though to shut out the word I knew he was going to utter.

"Yes," he said.

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And then I stumbled to my feet. "Lady Waterson"—and my voice sounded so far away that it didn't seem to belong to me—"I—I don't feel very well. I think it's the—sun. I would like to go below, if—you will excuse me." I was clinging to the railing, not daring to let go; and everything went very dark.

And then somebody put an arm round me and helped me across the deck, and down the stairs, and put me on to a settee. I was conscious all the time, but felt ill, and confused, and strange; and a noise was hammering in my ears, and I was so tired that I never wanted to open my eyes again. But presently a voice said, "I want you to drink this." And when I looked I found that Owen Westcott—Virginia's lover—was kneeling at my side.

"No," I said, pushing the glass away. "I am better, thank you. The faintness is passing. I only want to be left alone—quite alone. Will you tell Lady Waterson this? And will you leave me?"

"No!" His voice was dogged. "As long as you remain here, I remain. There must be somebody to look after you."

"But there is no occasion. I am perfectly well now—only tired. Will you oblige me by leaving me?"

He did not move from the position he had taken up on the settee beside me, excepting to fold his arms and compress his lips.

"Well, then, I must go," I said, feeling my way towards the door, my legs trembling so beneath me that I could hardly walk. "Your—presence disturbs me."

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"Hilary!" he cried, springing after me and seizing me by the arm, "why do you turn from me? What is the matter? What have I done? An hour ago, ten minutes ago, you smiled upon me. And now—what has happened? You have received a shock. It was something I said, or that Lady Waterson said. But we only spoke of your work and—Virginia. There was no cause; it couldn't have been anything we said or did. It was the sun, the heat. You have been overdoing yourself—working too hard. Hilary, come and sit down, and let me stay with you and help you."

"Help me!" I murmured, steeling myself against the pleading in his voice and his eyes. "Help me! Why, you are the very last person in the world who could help me, Mr. Westcott."

"But I love you."

"Oh!" I cried passionately, "don't speak of love to me now, for I cannot bear it. I cannot bear it—till—things are cleared up, if that is ever possible. Mr. Westcott, will you remove your hand? I——"

Somebody was coming down the stairs, but he did not release me. It was Lady Waterson. She stared at Owen, and she stared at me, and surprise flew to her face. Then she said quietly, in her sweet way: "I fancy Miss Forrest would like to be alone with me, Owen. Would you be good enough to tell Sir John that I am here if I am wanted? Thank you."

"Now"—she turned to me when he had gone—"I want you to lie down for a little while. No one shall disturb you. The servants are up on deck. You are overwrought. And I want you to return with me to the Old House for the night. Mr. Westcott shall

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leave a message at your boarding-house." She was making me comfortable while she talked—placing a cushion at my head and a shawl over my feet. "I have no daughters of my own," she continued softly, stroking my hair, "but were you my daughter I should endeavour to give you a few words of advice and help this evening, Miss Forrest—only because I have lived a little longer than you." She paused. "May I pretend I'm your mother?"

I nodded my head.

"Well, I should say to you, first, that there are few misunderstandings in life that, with a little patience and a little faith, cannot be cleared up; secondly, that most men, God bless them! are better than, on the surface, they appear to be; and thirdly"—she took my hand in hers and gently patted it—"that Owen Westcott is better than most. And now I am going to leave you. No one shall disturb you, and in an hour's time we shall be at Richmond."

And when she had gone I lay and cried my heart out, for I knew at last that I loved Owen Westcott now—and for all time.



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craved for sleep, was the last thing I desired. For sleep might still elude me, and then I should have to think. One cannot lie with one's mind an absolute blank, unless one happens to be an imbecile. And I dared not think. I had made up my mind on my course of action with regard to Owen Westcott and Virginia Rye, and I was going to stick to it. Possibly it might be the wrong course, but to me it seemed the only right and possible one. Virginia was to marry Owen, and not I. Virginia loved him as much and perhaps more than I. And whichever of the two of us Owen loved (and I knew that he loved me) he must marry Virginia. Blinded with tears, sick with misery, I had sat up in bed and fought it out through the long hours of the night. In the beginning, in the first shock of my discovery, I had doubted Owen. And later I had cried, filled with remorse, "Oh, how could I? Doubt Owen! I would sooner doubt the honour of God. He loves me, and only me." For, with sudden clearness, as the dawn had begun to creep into the room, I had unravelled the whole tangled skein of pitiful misunderstanding. Virginia had made a mistake—and she was not the first to make such a mistake. She was sensitive and emotional. She imagined Owen loved her when his feelings for her had been simply those of cousinly affection. She had misconstrued all his little acts of kindness, his interest in her welfare, his sympathy over her work into love. His visits to her, his walks with her, his talks with her, she had cheated herself into believing had arisen out of love. As she loved him she believed he loved her. Her own devotion for him had blinded her to realities. And had

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she not said that he had never spoken of love to her, never referred to their marriage? My pulses quickened with relief and hope as I recollected her words. And I had comforted her, told her to have faith in a man who at the time was deeply in love with me. Oh, the tragic humour of it! I jumped out of bed and plunged my face and hands into cold water, dashing the drops against my forehead and burning, tear-stained eyes. I must clear my brain and senses, whip up my jaded mind to think what must be done, now I had arrived at the truth of things. For the truth it was I was as convinced as that I breathed and moved. Virginia had been living in a fool's paradise, away up in the rosy cloudland, touched by the magic wand of love. And now—she would have to step down to the dreary barren wastes of the earth. Who must tell her of this pitiful mistake she had been making through the long years? Owen? But, no. Owen was unaware that, without the asking, she had given him so much, her all, all that she had to give. No, this shame must be spared her. Well, who then . . . I? How could I? . . . The shame of it would kill her.

Drawing up the blind, allowing the cool dawn to enter, with bare feet I paced up and down the room, wondering, puzzling, cogitating. Five long hours had it taken me to reason away practically and logically my doubt of Owen's love for me, and to arrive at the knowledge and understanding of Virginia's true position. I was desperately tired, the dawn was coming quickly, daylight would shortly flood the room. I must make up my mind as to what action I must take. There was only one way, of course.

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Why did I say "what action must I take"? I laughed nervously, and the sound of it through the quiet room jarred upon me. There *could* be only one way. Owen and I must marry, and Virginia must make the best of her life. I was very fond of Virginia, but I couldn't be expected to give Owen up to her; besides he loved me. I must tell her gently, quietly. She would probably try to smile as some women are able to do when receiving their death-blow. She was made of that sort of stuff; she was plucky by nature; her only weakness had been her mistake about Owen. And, ah God!—and I flung myself on my knees beside the bed—how she worshipped Owen. She loved him with all the intensity of her nature, and how little she had apparently asked of him. Only to be in his presence, to see him, to speak to him, to walk with him. He was the sum of her existence, her all, her life. What would she do when she had lost him? Who was to take his place? *Would she go under?* My heart stopped beating at the thought. *Would she go under?* Those had been her own words to me when she told me her story. But for this man, whose name she had never breathed, she would have gone under—she said. What did she mean? Would she have taken her life, sick of its monotony, of its awful loneliness? Or would she—but I left my thought unfinished—Virginia Rye was not that sort.

And she had said I had so much—good health, good spirits and youth. But what would these avail me now, if—I gave up Owen? And—to give up Owen would be ridiculous, preposterous. He would not turn to her for consolation. Some men might, but not Owen. Some men turning to a woman for

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her sympathy and friendship in his dark hour might learn to love her in a calm, unimpassioned way. But would Owen? The blood drained away from my face at the thought, leaving me sick and trembling. What was I to do? I could not stand much more of this. A faintness was creeping over me, and with an effort, as the first ray of sunshine streamed into the room, I raised myself from my knees and crept back to bed.

I must have fallen into a brief sleep, for the next thing I remember was that Lady Waterson stood beside my bed, dressed in a white wrapper and with a tea-cup in her hand.

"You asked to be called at eight o'clock," she said, in her pleasant, low-toned voice, "and I told the maid that I would bring you your tea. Are you better, Hilary? You will let me call you by your name?"

At her words the whole tide of my misery swept over me, which, in the first moment of consciousness, I had forgotten.

For an instant I turned my face away from the sunlight to the wall; then: "Yes, I am better, thank you, Lady Waterson," I said. "And I will drink the tea while I am dressing. I must hurry, or I shall be late."

"But you are not going to your work this morning? You are as white as a sheet." She laid her hand on my shoulder as I got out of bed.

"Yes," I replied, "I must go to my work. Why, work is the only thing left to me." And vaguely, as I uttered the words, I wondered what I meant by them. Had I then come to a decision before I fell

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asleep? Perplexedly I drew my hand across my forehead, trying to remember.

"Why," she asked, "do you say that work is the only thing left to you?" She moved a curtain in position.

"Because," I returned slowly, searching about for suitable words, "work sometimes is the best for one. Better than anything else. The only right thing for one—at the moment. The only solution of one's difficulties."

She stood and looked at me thoughtfully while I caressed the sun-warmed carpet with my bare feet. "I notice," she observed, after a while, "that you say 'at the moment.' What comes afterwards?"

"Ah," I replied, "I don't know. I dare not think of the future. For the present my strength is hardly sufficient. I must just go one step at a time, saying to myself: 'I must work now, play-time has not yet arrived.' And later, perhaps, a way will be found—a way that I cannot see——"

"Yes?" she said, gently.

"A way that will lead to easier places when everything will be put right, straightened up, and I—and another shall sit down in the sunshine and play. And now I must fly through my dressing, dear Lady Waterson, or I shall be late."

"I don't understand it," was all she said, perplexedly, and with a little sigh she left the room.

But *I* understood. My decision had been made. How and by what means I had arrived at that decision I knew not. Perhaps it had come in my sleep; perhaps it had only arrived as I spoke to Lady Waterson, but there it was—cold and clear in the day-

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light, and not to be taken back. I must give up Owen—for the present. And I must keep on repeating those words, "*for the present*," over and over again, just to make myself believe that the renunciation would be only of temporary duration, to cheer me on my way, to help me through the days. Virginia Rye must have Owen a little longer, continue to live in her fool's paradise, bask in the sunshine of his presence, for—if he was taken away from her, if she were undeceived, if the truth were made known to her, what might she not do? Would she win through, or would she *go under*? She would go under. With relentless persistency the words spread themselves out before my eyes. They were on the mirror, on the walls, on the white counterpane, on the floor. Later they were written on the clear blue of the sky, on the boardings of the railway stations, on the windows of the carriages, on the moving 'buses, on the door of the depot, on my sheet of writing paper. *She would go under*. And it would be my fault. So I must give up Owen—"Not for always!" my soul cried out; "only for the present. Just for a while, to give Virginia Rye a chance."

"A chance of what?" asked reason, cropping up. But to this my soul could give no satisfactory reply. It was simply too tired to entertain anything so strenuous as reason or logic. All that it was able to grasp at the moment was that Owen must be given up. And the owner of the soul must work, work, work to forget the past, present and future.

"But by giving up Owen, do you mean he must marry Virginia? Otherwise the sacrifice will be of no avail."

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"Don't!" I cried. And I put my fingers in my ears.

And so during that long morning I banged away at my typewriter, manipulating the keys with a swiftness and precision that were purely automatic. While I corresponded with dipsomaniacs I needn't and couldn't think of anything but the dipsomaniacs; of their weaknesses and failings, of their cravings and ravings.

Mr. Jones, pausing in his work and with a backward look over his shoulder, enquired if there were any special stress of work on.

I shook my head.

"Well, what's all the noise and hurry about?"

"The hurry? Is there any hurry?"

"That's what I'm asking for."

I looked at him vaguely.

"Perhaps you're trying to smash your machine?"

"Perhaps I am," said I, with some asperity at the foolishness of his suggestion. And, with a sigh over the incomprehensibleness of women, he returned to his work.

"Vita" patients came and went. Mr. Weldon prescribed for some. I for others. My mind wandering a little, I recommended Phlebito for indigestion, and Dyspepso No. 2 for a gathered finger. Only Mr. Jones's glance of horror recalled me to my senses; and the lady with the whitlow received the electricity Jupiter as a salve outwardly and inwardly.

At twelve o'clock Mr. Jones went out to lunch, and, with a sigh of relief at being left to myself, I leaned my body across the table and pillowed my head

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on my arms. Just for five minutes would I allow myself to rest—not think. Only rest. I closed my eyes, devoutly hoping all “Vita” and “Anti-alco” patients would keep away, when the sound of the rapid turning of the door handle caused me to spring to my feet just as Owen Westcott walked into the room.

For a moment we stood looking at one another—he strong, cool and smiling, I with the blood pounding through my veins and nervously backing against the wall behind my table; then: “You wish to see your cousin—Miss Rye?” I managed to say.

“No, thank you, I have come to see you,” he returned, quietly, “and you know it.” He came a little nearer to the table, and his hands were behind his back, as though he could not trust them. “I have come to know if you will be my wife—if you will do me that great honour. You know that I love you. I love you with all my heart, and soul, and strength, and I want you to marry me as soon—why, as soon as ever you can. . . .” He smiled at me whimsically. “Last night I could not put this question to you, because you were ill—such a white, tired little Hilary—but now I must have my answer. This waiting is playing the deuce with me . . . I cannot wait any longer. Hilary, say that you will be my wife” He was coming closer now. His arms were held out to me. In another second they would have been round me—our two hearts beating together—when—I remembered Virginia Rye.

“Oh, don’t!” I cried, with a great cry springing away from him and setting my back against the wall. “Don’t touch me. I—I cannot marry you. I am sorry, but I cannot. And oh, go now. Somebody

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will be coming in—a patient, Mr. Weldon, or—or—Miss Rye. We must not be seen like this. Look—I must go for some medicine. I must act deceitfully. I must pretend you have come for some tabloids. Let me pass, please.”

“I will not let you pass.” He barred the way, and I shrank before the passion in the eyes which had once been so tired. “I do not care if a patient, or Mr. Weldon, or my Cousin Virginia, or the entire office staff enters the room. I am not ashamed of my love for you. I glory in it. It has transformed my dull life into one of radiance. I love you. Ah, how I love you, Hilary.”

I laughed away the tears that were surging to my eyes, and he winced.

“And you have no other reply? Nothing kinder to say, or—gentler? You laugh. You cannot whisper back: ‘I love you, Owen’?”

I turned away my head, to hide the misery in my face. Oh, that I could. My whole being yearned to whisper those words to him, to find myself in his arms, with my cheek against his dear cheek.

Again I laughed—a harsh, discordant laugh—for now the tears had come in earnest, and with face averted I took them from my eyes.

“Don’t!” he shouted, imperatively. “Don’t laugh. If you cannot and do not love me, at least do not laugh at me. Why, yesterday—I imagined, I thought that you did care for me a little; that you had learned to love me—perhaps not much as yet, but enough to be my wife. Hilary, were you not—were we not happy yesterday?”

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"Yes," I cried, "but don't speak of it. It—it seems like another life, and now——"

"You are unhappy because you are sending me away. You do love me; you cannot deny it." His arms were round me now—strong, compelling. "You cannot meet my eyes. As you tell me to go, your cheeks blanch, your eyes brim over with tears. Hilary, you love me; you cannot deny it. If you deny it, I don't believe you. If you tell me to go, I shan't, unless you can look me in the face and say solemnly before God that you don't love me. Look up and repeat the words after me: 'Owen, I don't love you.'"

"You are cruel," I cried, struggling with him.

"Cruel! Heaven forgive me if I utter a harsh word or ever harbour an unkind thought of Hilary. Hilary, my own little one, my will-o'-the-wisp, look me in the face and say, truthfully: 'Owen, I don't love you.'"

I ceased to struggle; the strain was becoming too great; but, drawing myself from him a little, I looked into his eyes; the love in them made me quiver, but with a long indrawing of the breath I managed to say steadily, quietly: "Owen Westcott, whether I love you, or whether I don't, I *cannot* marry you. Now—will you let me go?" And as I spoke, Mr. Weldon came into the room, and Owen Westcott walked out.

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currant jelly (a couple of rabbits—not fowls—had been roasted in honour of the return of the prodigal, and three forcemeat balls—for did not the prodigal love forcemeat balls?—had been given unto her).

“Not returning to London!” The rabbit-back on mother’s plate perceptibly jumped.

I nodded my head.

“You are tired of your work so soon? It was just what I predicted.”

“I am not tired of my work,” I said, slowly, with my eyes on my plate, “but I don’t think I am very well; that is the reason; the heat has tried me a good deal.”

“And another reason?” Mother’s eyes narrowed as she looked at me.

“Oh—I—I think I was homesick,” I stammered; and grandmother, who had come to the Garden House to give me a welcome, giggled behind her hand.

“What a beautiful lie, Hilary!” she remarked; but as she spoke she shot me a covert look of sympathy and intelligence which left me wondering what it meant.

“And you have lost your situation?” mother enquired.

“Not definitely. Mr. Weldon was kind enough to say that I had become very valuable to him, and he would keep the place open for some weeks, while getting temporary assistance at the moment.”

“That is very considerate of him,” said mother, sarcastically. “Naturally, he does not wish to lose you. A well-educated girl of your social standing is not to be found serving in a chemist’s shop every

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grandmother drily, studying me with her sharp, bright eyes.

I did not reply.

"I think it would be kind to let Hilary get on with her tea. She looks fagged out." Of course it was Miranda who spoke—kind, sympathetic Miranda—and I threw her a look of gratitude. "We will tell her *our* news, if there is any, and she will tell us hers another time." And so they proceeded to unfold the doings and sayings of the village during the months I had been away. Some of it I had already heard in their letters, most of it was fresh, little of it excited me. And this was to be my life. I thought a little drearily: "How shall I stand it?" Before I had found it dull, but now—now I had known Owen Westcott, from whom I had fled in my weakness, not trusting myself to see him again.

They were rising from the table now, pushing back their chairs. "Miranda," I said, "will you come into the garden? The evening is lovely."

"Put some shawls round you," commanded mother. "The dew will be very heavy."

Arm in arm we wandered down the lawn to the river, which was flooded with the light of the dying sun.

"How beautiful!" I breathed, drinking in the old familiar bits of loveliness: the foaming weir, the thread of glistening water springing from the rocks, the rose petals at our feet, the great branches of the beech, with their wealth of glowing leaves stretching across the stream, the mass of tangled bracken, and wild rhubarb and purple loose strife growing on the sloping banks. Away in the garden a bird was call-

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dreadfully afraid that you would fall in love with somebody queer at the depot."

"No," I said, "it isn't a dipsomaniac; it's Owen Westcott. I have mentioned him in my letters."

"You have," said she, "very frequently. But, of course, he is much too old for you, and I suppose that is why you have refused him."

"Not at all," I contradicted, crossly. "And how do you know he is old?"

"Why, you said so in your letters." She looked at me in some surprise. "There is nothing to get cross about."

"Yes, there is. He is not old. And if he were a thousand I shouldn't mind."

"Well, that's all right. Why, then, don't you marry him?"

"Because another woman loves him."

"And does he love her?"

"No."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure."

Miranda clasped her hands and unclasped them. She opened her mouth to speak, and she shut it again; she half rose from the step, and she sat down again, and all the time she looked at me with half-pitying, half-incredulous eyes. At length she spoke: "Hilary Forrest, I always knew you were a romantic, emotional, highfalutin' sort of person, but I did think you possessed one grain of common sense. Here you refuse to marry a man who loves you and whom you love in return, simply because another woman has had the misfortune to place her affections in the same direction. You are mad——"

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when he asked me to be his wife—he came to the depot—and I sent him away. No—let me finish. I want to try and make you understand. I claim no praise for what I have done. I am not a romantic, highfalutin' person, as you describe me. I think every other girl would have behaved in exactly the same way. Could I—could you have taken him away from Virginia Rye? I have so much, and she has so little. A day may come when she will find out that her love is not returned and—God help her on that day! but the knowledge of this shall not come through me, of that I am resolved. At present I am not strong enough to see Owen—I knew that he would call again—so I fled from him. Mr. Weldon put no obstacle in my way when I asked if I might go for my holidays at once. He had seen Owen in the depot, and I think he guessed that something was wrong. I sent a note saying good-bye to the Cartons. Virginia Rye suspected nothing, and—here I am, praying for strength to hold out, for I am very weak, Miranda.”

“Weak!” she ejaculated. “No, only foolish, and very mistaken. On the surface your conduct appears most noble and self-sacrificing, but—it isn’t.”

“Oh!” I said.

“No,” said she, in her wise, thoughtful way, “it is mistaken quixoticism”—she stumbled over the word. “Has it not struck you that, in saving Miss Rye, you are sacrificing Mr. Westcott? Now listen. Mr. Westcott won’t marry Miss Rye because you have given him up, so we will say *her* life is spoilt—that is one life; *you* won’t marry Mr. Westcott, so, presumably, *his* life is spoilt—that is two lives; and in

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not marrying Mr. Westcott *your* life is spoilt, so that is three lives. Now if *you* marry Mr. Westcott, only Miss Rye's life is spoilt. Surely one spoilt life is better than three spoilt lives?" She looked at me triumphantly, and though her logic surprised it strangely comforted me.

"Y-es," I admitted, doubtfully, "but——"

"And what is he like?" she continued, dismissing the argument as though completely finished with. "I hope he is good looking and dark?"

"Yes, he is both."

"You will make a beautiful couple," she cried, ecstatically. "Oh, Hilary, the first engagement in the family is most exciting and thrilling."

I looked at her in amazement. "Haven't I just told you that I cannot marry Owen on account of Virginia?" I said, irritably.

"But that is all nonsense," said she. "Virginia is a most tiresome person. She must marry somebody else, or—or die."

I sat and stared at my sister, unable to speak. Miranda, who was always so gentle, so sweet, so kind, to talk like this. I had imagined that she would be sympathetic, that she would be sorry for Virginia, that she would say I had done the right thing; and here she was condemnatory, cold, logical——

"Girls!" Mother's voice came across the lawn from the drawing-room window. "Come in. Your grandmother is going, and wishes to say 'Good-bye.'"

Silently we left the river. The sun had gone, the garden and lawn were enveloped in a shadowy grey-ness, lights shone from the windows.

RIDGEMOOR ONCE AGAIN

"Not a word of this to anybody, Miranda," I said as we neared the house.

She knit her brows. "And how soon will things come right?"

"Perhaps never."

"Rubbish!" said she. "*I* will see to that." She put her arm round me. "Hilary, I am beginning to like George just a tiny bit better. Not much, you know—but he is so patient one cannot help admiring his quiet strength. And he has shaved his moustache. I like moustaches, as a rule, but George's was so painfully red and like a tooth-brush, and though he was so proud of it, he has shaved it off for my sake. Mrs. Pratt is very angry about it, but I—I like George for it."

"So do I," said I, warmly. "I am so glad, Miranda."

"There is nothing to be glad about yet," she said, quickly. "But I was thinking a double wedding in the family would be rather fun."

"Oh, were you?" said I, as we entered the house.

Mother met us in the hall, solicitous about damp feet.

"Yes—no," I said to her enquiry. "They are a little wet—I mean they are not worth bothering about." I was thinking of what Miranda had said.

"I wonder what you do mean?" queried mother. "Ellen, put Miss Miranda's and Miss Hilary's shoes to the kitchen fire. They might have been in the river."

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do it with strenuous labour and stertorous breathing—grandmother intended doing everything other people did till God removed her, she said; but even she would become a little faint-hearted at the prospect of such an ascent on so warm a morning.

I was alone with only the plovers wheeling darkly against the clear blue of the sky, quite alone. Man was at work in the valley below, and on the white farms dotted about the hillside, but not up here. There was nothing up here for him to do. The ground was too barren to yield anything but a short, dry-looking herbage, scanty and without nutriment for his flocks, and the site was exposed to the four winds of heaven without any protection to break their force. Here on a stormy day of Winter one was almost blown off one's feet, lashed by driving scuds of sleet and hail; now one could lie full length, grateful for the little cool breeze which tempered the fierce rays of the sun.

Pillowing the back of my head on my folded arms I studied the small, strong writing on the envelope which lay before me. Once before had I seen his writing—on the card of introduction he had given to me to Dr. Peignton. I tried to imagine his mood as he had penned the words: "Miss Hilary Forrest, the Garden House, Ridgemoor, Derbyshire." Was he sore and angry at my having run away without a word of farewell, or was he still loving and patient?

But no, he was anything but patient. The first words of his letter caused me to sit up:

"Hilary, I am coming down to Ridgemoor at the end of the week. I cannot get away earlier (or I

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should be with you now). You thought by running away that you would escape any further badgering. Do you know me as little as that? Ridgemoor is about five hours' journey from London. If you went to Timbuctoo I should follow you. Do you know why? Because in our interview on Monday you never once said that you did *not* love me. I tried to pin you down to that, to make you say those words—was I cruel, little girl? But you evaded me, you refused to be driven into a corner; true to your name of 'will-o'-the-wisp,' you simply said: 'I won't marry you,' and took to your heels and ran. But you did not say: 'I don't love you,' and to that fact I am hanging on with all my strength as a drowning man clutches at a straw. Hilary, something inexplicable, extraordinary has come between us. What it is you and Heaven, or the devil alone, know. But *I*, too, mean to know, and clear away this horrible misunderstanding. I am convinced—will you think me vain?—that last Sunday morning you intended to say 'Yes' to my question. Perhaps you were not quite ready; perhaps, like an *ignis-fatuus*, you wanted to dance along, playing 'catch who catch can' yet a little while longer, still I do not think you meant to say 'No.' What then happened? Over and over again I ask myself that question, but can find no reply, no solution. *You* must give me the key to it. In the eyes of your friends—the Misses Sparrow, Mr. Weldon, Mr. Jones, Lady Waterson—I am a laughing stock—a subject for pity, if not derision. They can give me no reply to my questions: the exact moment at which you left town, the exact moment at which you will return; your reason for leaving in

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such a hurry; were you ill, or well, etc., etc. They thought you were well, but were not quite sure—the Misses Sparrow said this—so I must come myself to find out. Hilary, you will not turn your back upon me? You will not shut the door in my face? For, oh, how I love you!

“Yours now and for all time,

“OWEN.”

Straightway, for fear that later my strength should fail me, I took from my pocket a pencil, and on the blank leaf of his letter I wrote my reply:

“DEAR MR. WESTCOTT: I cannot and will not see you; so please do not come. If you come, I must run elsewhere. Surely you will not put me to so much inconvenience; as, naturally, I require a rest after my work. I thank you for the honour you have done me, but I find it impossible to give you any other answer than the one I gave you on Monday.

“HILARY FORREST.”

Then I lay for a long while with my face turned to the grass, fingers pressing hard against my eyes to keep back the tears.

Some hours later Miranda slowly climbed the hill and threw herself down on the grass beside me.

“Dinner is over,” she said, briefly; “cold lamb and gooseberry tart. And mother and grandmother’s foreheads are wrinkled with perplexity.”

I threw a small stone down the hill, and she lay in silence with her eyes on the distant blue hills.

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"They may be coming up here," she observed after a while, "to search for you." And I was on my feet in an instant.

"I'm only joking," she laughed, pulling me down by my skirt. "I've brought you some sandwiches and fruit. I thought you might be hungry." She watched me while I ate.

"Fresh trouble, I suppose?" she queried when I had got to the fruit stage. "He—he's not going to commit suicide?"

"No, he's coming to Ridgemoor."

Miranda opened her eyes. "What a very sensible man. I *am* glad. When does he arrive?"

"Oh, I'm stopping him, of course. I have just written to that effect."

"Stopping him?"

"Certainly. What else could I do? I—I daren't see him."

"Oh, Hilary Forrest, you are a fool," she said, forcibly. "You still intend sticking to your idiotic resolution."

"You wouldn't call it idiotic if you knew Virginia Rye."

"I don't want to know Virginia Rye. She is the very last person I wish to know. I would run a mile in all this heat to get out of her way. She can have no self-respect, or she would not wish to marry a man who loved another woman."

"But she does not know," I interrupted. "Haven't I explained the situation clearly? Cannot you understand?" But Miranda refused to understand anything so absolutely misunderstandable and foolish. It was I who could not see things in their true propor-

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tion. I was wronging myself, and Owen, and Virginia—Virginia most of all. No woman possessing one spark of pride would be happy in marrying a man who was indifferent to her.

“But I don’t want her to marry him,” said I. Miranda regarded me with eyes of pity—the pity one bestows upon imbeciles, and I shuffled beneath her gaze. “I wonder what you do want?” she asked, patiently.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I cried, plucking tufts of grass from the ground and flinging them away. “I only know that I want her to have him a little longer, that I want her to find out for herself, to find out gradually, that the truth should not be flung in her face in one overwhelming blow. You know, Miranda, a sudden shock will kill one, where, if bad news is broken carefully and gradually, human nature has time to gather together its resources to withstand the blow.”

“And in the meantime?”

“I am going to work.”

“In London?”

I shook my head. “I dare not return to London. Owen Westcott would never be off the door-steps of Nottingham Place and the depot. I am going to work at home. I have been thinking it all out. By the way, have you any scarlet wool in your possession?”

“Scarlet wool?”

“Yes,” I repeated, a trifle testily. “Don’t I speak clearly? I want some scarlet wool to knit a muffler for a deep-sea fisherman or the Curate’s Aid Society.”

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"Curates don't wear scarlet mufflers," she argued, and I implored her not to; that if she argued it would be the last straw; that I was bent upon knitting mufflers and working squares for mother's Uganda missionary bed-quilt to drown my thoughts and kill time. "There are the Y. M. C. A.'s, B. W. T. A.'s, S. P. G. A.'s, and dozens of other associations for which I mean to work," I told her, and added that I thought of offering my services as secretary to the Ridgemoor branch of the B.W.T.A.; that after my wide experience of dipsomaniacs I felt peculiarly fitted for the post. And she retorted with crushing directness that I should ruin any association for which I worked.

"Miranda, you are very depressing," I said, "and very different from what I imagined you to be. All my life you have been perched on a high pedestal in my estimation. I thought you sweet and sympathetic."

She tapped her small foot up and down on the turf. "People with fair hair and pink cheeks always labour under a cruel misconception of their characters. I am not sweet, and gentle, and kind, and—don't want to be. I want to be daring, and reckless, and wicked, like you—kick over the traces, go off on my own, have an exciting love affair. But I haven't the courage. My ivy-clinging characteristics have become permanent, part of my life. I shall marry George and settle down in a villa-residence with two servants and an 'at home' day." She spoke with a trailing, dreary inflection and gazed up at the sky, no more divinely blue than her own eyes.

"Go to London in my place. I'm sure Mr. Weldon

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would take you on. Patients would flock to the depot just to look at you. And you would soon pick up shorthand and typing."

She sprang to her feet, the colour flying all over her face. Then—she sat down with a flop.

"I daren't, Hilary. Mother would have a second fit. She is only just recovering from the one you caused her. Besides, I should be frightened. I have no real grit in me. And—wouldn't you miss me? You would have no one to talk to about Owen."

I snuggled close to her and wound my arm around her neck. "Miranda," I whispered, "I won't say you are sweet, and kind, and gentle, as it annoys you. But will you be cross if I mention casually that you are a brick, a perfectly unselfish brick? But for you I should have been a beast of a girl. Your thinking such a lot of me has made me try to be a bit more decent than ever I should have been. It has been through your influence. If I hadn't lived with you for over twenty years I should have accepted Owen straightway and let Virginia Rye go to the devil. You say it has been an unselfish act, my sending him away. It has been your act living in me. You have also said, time and again, that your life, up to the present, has been a wasted one, that you are of no use to anybody. I am beginning to think, Miranda, that the pity is there are not more 'wasted' lives in the world."

"You really think that?" she murmured, her eyes now on the fields, shimmering in the afternoon sunshine.

"I am sure of it," said I. "And away in the distance I see two black figures, Miranda. I may be

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mistaken, but they appear familiar to me
skirt the hill to Brook Brow and home.

"They will be hot and tired after their
she, doubtfully.

"And disappointed, you think?"

She nodded her head. "Mothers have
feelings."

"They have," I agreed, with a sigh.
down the fields to meet them, and it was
the big hill. Mother isn't really fond
randa."

"She is as fond as you will allow her
little misunderstandings arise quite as
your fault as from hers."

"Oh," said I, stumbling over a stone
ment at such an astonishing proposition.

"Yes," continued my sister, her voice
little, for Miranda had always found it
cross to people, "if you were as considerate
as you are to Miss Rye, why—why——"

"I should be a step nearer heaven,"
humbly.

"Exactly. And if you look at me any
such great troubled eyes I'll——"

"Yes?"

"I'll send for Mr. Westcott," said she
lips with a snap.

"I wish you would," I cried from me
then: "No, you mustn't, Miranda."

CHAPTER XXX

JUANITA BECOMES ENGAGED

I BEGAN my muffler, much to the interest of the entire family. It was not a pretty muffler—a pink and buff stripe—but, as I said to grandmother, it would keep the neck of a deep-sea fisherman just as warm as one of more artistic colouring. The wool was hot in my fingers as I sat knitting beneath the beech tree; stitches dropped and refused to be picked up; pink stripes merged into buff, and buff into pink. But I persevered. Only by hard, concentrated work could I drown my thoughts, stifle my longing for Owen. Only by hard work could I hope to get through the long days which heaped themselves up like the ascending notes of a scale before my eyes.

Knitting over, I rushed to read to an old bed-ridden woman in Brick Row. That Betty Sharples was almost stone-deaf in no way deterred me from my effort. Then I would weed the campanula bed for mother, cut the pages of a periodical for father, darn Miranda's stockings, machine the seams of a blouse for Mick, and help Abinadab pick fruit for jam.

Mother regarded me in open-mouthed astonishment, and grandmother chuckled, and offered me a kiss one day which I accepted gingerly.

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But I succeeded in killing time after a fashion, and was also trying to be good. And if being "good" meant a continuation of such excessive dullness, I felt I would rather die before the month was out.

"You'll never stick it," said Miranda on hearing me groan over the covering of jam-pots one morning.

"Do you mean the paper on the pots?"

"No, your life."

I sat down on a kitchen Windsor chair and folded my sticky hands on my apron, glad of an excuse to leave the pots for a moment. "Yes, I shall," I returned.

Miranda shook her head. She was making a blanc-mange, and was engaged in stirring it one way in a copper-lined saucepan for fourteen minutes. Cook was away in the back kitchen, washing up dishes.

"What makes you think I shan't?" I enquired, more than willing to abandon domestic problems for an indefinite length of time.

"How long have you been at home?" she asked, without replying to my question.

"Fifteen days."

"And how many letters have you had from Owen?"

"Three; but he won't write again."

"No, he'll come instead," she said, calmly.

"I don't think so," I returned, trying to keep out of my voice the hope that he would.

"Should you see him if he came?"

"No—yes—I mean——" I said, clutching after the truth.

Miranda looked triumphant, and I returned to my jam-pots and white of egg.

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From the side window of the kitchen a peep of the river could be obtained, and a corner of the Pratts' garden. George was sitting beneath a chestnut tree with his eyes glued to our house. I wondered wasn't he tired of staring at a house, and how soon his holidays would be at an end. His attitude was dejected, and suddenly, sorry for him, I called Miranda to the window—one glimpse of her white-aproned figure would restore his spirits. She coloured on catching sight of him, and hastily withdrew.

"How soon are you going to marry him?" I asked.

"When *you* marry Owen."

"You have kept George waiting long enough," I said, severely. "Mother and Mrs. Pratt are falling into despair."

She stirred busily; then: "We were discussing your affairs, and not mine. Hilary, you are becoming pale and thin. Your eyes are like——"

"Potatoes?"

"Anything you like. I overheard mother and grandmother talking about you yesterday."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; and grandmother smells a rat."

"Of course she does!" I cried, flinging down my scissors and paste-brush, and stamping about the floor. "She has the eyes and nose of a lynx and a bloodhound. What did she say? But, no; don't tell me. I shall only get in a temper, and I'm trying to be good. Oh, Miranda, it's dreadful living with a pack of women, and doing work like this. What *shall* I do?"

"One word and you can throw the whole thing up

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and be married to-morrow. And you are in my light—I can't see the saucepan."

Mick entered the kitchen with a letter in her hand which she thrust at me. "Mother forgot to give you this letter at breakfast. She put it on the sideboard with a lot of circulars. And she says, when you have finished covering the jam, will you go and help prepare the drawing-room for cleaning?"

"All right," I groaned, examining the envelope. It was from Virginia Rye. "Why don't *you* help with the drawing-room?"

"I am finishing my sketch of the river, and the light is particularly good just now." Mick spoke in her superior, irritating art voice.

"If we were all artists, who would clean the drawing-rooms of the world?"

"*You* are the last person to ask such a question, Hilary Forrest," she returned, walking out of the kitchen. And, knowing there was some truth in her remark, I was doubly annoyed. Seating myself by the open window, I read Virginia's letter. "Do you want to hear it?" I asked Miranda, by-and-bye. "When you have heard it, I think you will cease—tempting me to accept Owen Westcott."

"Wait," she replied, "till I have poured this into the mould. There"—she perched herself on the end of the kitchen table—"I am ready."

"DEAR MISS FORREST: I have arrived at the everlasting hills of God, of which we talked during the long hot days, and I find them very refreshing and life-giving. The last week in town was almost unbearable. You did well to give in and take leave of

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the depot when you did, though it was awkward for everybody. Imagine a large, slow girl with a yellow fringe sitting in your old chair, trying to do your work. Mr. Weldon shifted her on to Mr. Jones, and Mr. Jones shifted her on to me, and I shifted her on to Billy, who put his tongue in his cheek and winked when she wanted to know which of the medicines would cure a cold in her head. Poor girl! I think we were all a little hard on her, but we only regarded her as a 'temporary'; a something to be put up with till the return of Miss Forrest. But I, for one, might have been kinder. Somehow I feel kind this evening, and if Miss Jenkins were here now I should say nice things to her, I know.

"Oh, the wonder of the golden sun slipping into the quiet sea as I write. And I must pause to gaze upon the glory of the panorama spread out before me: sunset sky and all its radiance reflected in the water below. And away in the distance violet mountains soft, blurred, shadowy, with a film of diaphanous mist brooding o'er their summits like a web of white cloud. And people live in cities when they could live in the country. Extraordinary! Incomprehensible! I am sure my soul would become a little whiter were I to dwell always in clean, sweet places.

"You will gather from this that I am happy, that black care has slipped away, and contentment has taken its place. Aye, I am indeed happy, quite extraordinarily happy. For *he* (the great important *he* of my life) and his invalid mother are here. And, while she lies on her chair in the shade of the house, he and I walk, and look at the sea, and listen to its

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murmur against the cliffs, and its 'draw' gle, and its laughter when it disports in white, curly waves on the yellow sand. a little—but not much yet, for he came home worn with a strained, anxious look. 'Overworked,' his mother said, but he said nothing.

" 'Talk to me, little cousin,' he said. 'I will lie he lay on his back in the heather. 'The one thing I want to—forget; and your voice is so soothing. Or read aloud to me—what is it? Nothing deep, or clever, or philosophic—just a thing that is sane, and sweet, and humorous. I did as I was bade, dipping, as we are in the country of Borrow, here and there into the sea. And it troubled me not that he fell asleep; I was glad, for he needs rest. And, do not think me foolish, but while he slept I could look at him, and I was ashamed of the love which lay in my eyes. I gave him to my heart's desire, absorb every drop of his strong, tired face. It seems to me now that I never could have been a time when I did not love Cousin Wen; and if there was, how vapid and how colourless life must have been! Or do you know I could not live without him now.

" 'Why am I writing to you thus? I should have sent you such a practical letter, full of details of the depot, of a description of our journey, and of any and everything which go to the making of a friendly epistle. And, instead, I write like a girl of sixteen. But then you are the only person being who knows my secret, and it is so natural that a woman always to bottle up her feelings

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you have seen me 'down,' and I wanted you to know that I was 'up.' Such a knowledge would give you pleasure, I felt sure. You see, I credit you with friendly feelings towards me.

"My only pleasure in returning to my work at the end of this too brief fortnight will be to see you, and to know that you are better.

"Your sincere friend,

"VIRGINIA RYE."

Miranda sat in silence for some time with a little frown on her face, swinging her heels to and fro; then: "She doesn't know you are not returning?"

"No."

She examined her mould of blanc-mange, and with a fork removed a tiny bit of lemon-peel.

"You are beginning to think I have done the right thing?" I queried.

"No—yes. I don't know what to say. It is too difficult. But—I wouldn't be in your shoes, Hilary. My strength wouldn't stand such a test." She sprang from the table and poked the fire with excessive violence. "I—I heard you crying in the night. And I saw you doing gymnastics."

"Somebody said in *The Daily Mail* they induced sleep," I responded, carelessly.

She slammed down the poker. "And why aren't you sleeping?"

"The nights are so warm——" But cook entering the kitchen interrupted my explanation, and I returned to my jam-pots.

Later in the day I received another letter. Jua-

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nita wrote to inform me of her engagement to Tony and to scold me for not going down to Warraby to say "Good-bye" to them in person. The letter brimmed over with happiness and quiet fun. Of course she had always meant to have Tony when he had sufficient money to keep two people in moderate comfort. She had told him so. She was not a girl who would be content to live in a top pair back, with her hair in curlers, doing her own cooking and washing, turning her skirts, making herself flannel blouses from *Home Notes* patterns and spending her Sunday afternoons strolling with her husband in some public gardens. Tony—poor thing!—had not been cut out for work and money-making—she knew it as clearly as anybody else. So, till money turned up from somewhere, she had been obliged to refuse him. But miracles never ceased! The money had turned up—tons of it! And made by Tony himself. How had he done it? A pure accident. He had invented a game in his spare moments—one of those foolish games in which you try to do something you can't. A friend saw it and, with real commercial insight, advised him to put it on the market. It would just suit the British public. . . . And it did. Within a month everybody was playing it—and the shekels were pouring into Tony's pockets. Wise investments were made. Two of Juanita's Grand Trunks were sold out for the necessary purchase of a trousseau; and they were to be married on the twenty-first of September.

The letter ended with an invitation to be one of the bridesmaids, and she would present me with the frock. And when was I returning to town? She

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hoped soon, as they were having such a jolly time discussing houses, and honeymoons, and frocks, and chifions, etc., etc. And she wanted to hear *my* news—had I any? She hoped so. Being engaged was *very* nice.

And, as I read, a great envy filled my heart. She was so happy—and I was glad of that. Glad that my dear, kind Juanita was so blissfully contented, but my own loneliness was heightened by the contrast. Why should some people always live in the sunshine and others for ever in the shadow? I visioned the Carton family sitting in their pretty drawing-room: Cousin Janet amiable, kind, proud of her two daughters and prospective son-in-law, contented with her ability to produce hair-tidies from cocoatins. Dorothea amusing, unexpected in her remarks, original, a radiator of cheerfulness. Tony busy with his puzzles when he wasn't engaged in staring at his fiancée—handsome, faultlessly dressed, happy and wearing the proprietary air all nice men adopt when engaged to the girl of their heart. And the bride-elect, lazy as usual, head propped against a heap of silken cushions, artistically gowned in a flowing robe of Shantung silk, talking in her pretty, deep-toned, drawling voice—and talking such practical sense that Tony leaves his flies and spiders' webs to stare at her rapturously.

And I—I was alone in a garden threaded with Summer shine. And one is always lonelier in Summer than in Winter. And this garden was surely fashioned for—for . . . But I would not allow myself to think—to compare my lot with Juanita's.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE PACKING AND UNPACKING OF A TRUNK

THE days passed, and the end of the month still found me in Ridgemoor; still found me holding out. There were no more letters from Owen. My last to him had been so curt, so unkind, that I wondered not at his silence.

Mr. Weldon wrote, asking if he were to keep the post open any longer for me, and when I replied "No," I felt that the last door had been shut on my happiness. The Misses Sparrow wrote kind, cheery letters with all the news of the boarding-house. Mrs. Brady was engaged to be married (was everybody getting engaged?) to a retired army major. Mr. Marple had been faithless to Dr. Haigh, and had now embarked upon another treatment. Mr. Pidge had had a rise, and had taken a larger bedroom on the first floor; and Mr. Inglis had appeared to mope a good deal after my departure, and made constant enquiries for me. Then, quite casually, at the close of the letters a reference was made to my empty room; it was so small and high up, it would not let in a hurry, they felt sure. Wouldn't I return soon, to fill it? They missed me so much. And how poor Mr. Head and Mr. Weldon were running their "cure" without me, they dared not think. The financial loss must be enormous.

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These letters cheered me more than a little. Somebody cared for me—and at that time I had a great craving for affection. I was a failure in my own home, I knew. And I also knew that this failure was more or less through my own fault. I had always been able only to see things from my own point of view, while Miranda had apparently the knack of seeing everything from a thousand points of vantage. “She has eyes all over the place, just like a fly,” I cried, impatiently. “She can see sideways and forward and backward, and under and over and through, and I can see only one way and that badly.” And each day I came down to breakfast steadfastly resolving to see six sides, like Miranda, and within five minutes I had flown out at mother, or told Mick she was a fool.

“What is to be done?” I groaned one day to myself as I lay by the river with my cheek against the cool grass. “I am only twenty-three—just turned. I am healthy and strong, and shall probably live to be seventy. I am unhappy and discontented, bad tempered, and selfish. The more I try to be good the worse I get. I hate my life and work. I am deeply in love with Owen Westcott, and I have given him up to another woman. And, oh, how badly I want him, quite as much as she wants him; and, oh, how I love him! Am I a fool—an idiotic, sentimental, short-sighted fool? I believe I am.” And I turned my face to the grass and allowed the hot, slow tears to fall unchecked.

And then Miranda, the temptress, came. And because I was weak, and wanted to, I believed all she said. I *was* a fool. A *blamed* fool, if I would ex-

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cuse the strength of the expression. A fool of the first water. I was utterly demoralised through a false emotion. This was not unselfishness I was practising, but a foolish, romantic, maudlin scourging of my own flesh, which would do no good to a single living person. "What good do the Trappists do?" she asked, with flashing eyes. "Cowards who hide themselves within four walls, to escape the temptations of the world. No sacrifice is of any avail unless it benefits somebody." Somehow I knew her reasoning contained weak spots, but I raised no voice of dissension. I was glad to be stormed at, to be browbeaten by Miranda. It was what—in my weakness—I wanted.

"Come," she said, "and pack your box and return to London to-morrow." And meekly I followed her into the house; and together we carried down the old tin trunk and buff-coloured hat box from the box-room to the bedroom. And while Miranda packed, and talked, and admonished, I sat on my bed and watched and listened.

"You will write a note to-night to the Cartons, saying you have changed your mind and you will be delighted to act as one of Juanita's bridesmaids, if it is not too late. Then—the rest is easy."

"Easy! What am I to do next?"

She looked at me a little scornfully. "I imagined you were resourceful."

"Yes, but—it is difficult to write to a man to say that, after all, I have decided to marry him."

But Miranda could see no difficulty. It was the easiest thing in the world. Owen's greatest desire was that I should be his wife. Well, why couldn't I

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write and make an appointment, and tell him his wish should be granted?

"You make such a fuss about trifles," she said, locking the trunk. And when I mentioned that I had nothing in which to travel on the morrow, as she had packed all my stuff dresses away, she said: "Wear the one you've got on," and could not be made to see that muslin was unsuitable for a journey.

"Aren't you happy, Hilary Forrest?" she cried, seizing me round the waist and waltzing madly across the room. "But I can see you are. You're as red as a rose, and your eyes are like stars. And now we'll go and tell the family. Come along." And she dragged me down the stairs and pushed me into the drawing-room, and said: "Hilary's going back to London to-morrow." And then she laughed, and then, to my consternation, she cried. "I am so glad," she explained; and mother and Mick, who imagined she was fond of me, marvelled at her want of feeling.

And what the family, including grandmother, said about my changeableness of disposition and weakness of character I leave the reader to judge. Most readers have had families, given on occasion to the telling of home truths.

"There are only the luggage labels to address," said Miranda as we went to bed, "and I'm going to think out our—I mean your wedding dress."

But I did not return to London. The morning's post brought me another letter from Virginia Rye, which I read over breakfast. And when, a little later, I said slowly—so that there should be no tremor in my voice—that I was not going to London, after

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all, even mother made no comment, and allowed me to pass out of the room unchallenged. Straight to the river I went. Had I not always gone to it with all my joys and sorrows? September was with us now, and the lawn lay white with a heavy dew. Heavy, too, with sparkling moisture hung the nasturtiums and marguerites, dahlias and hollyhocks. But out above the river the sun had won through the mist, and, picking my way to the big, round stone above the shallow sparkling weir, I sat down and read Virginia's letter over again.

“DEAR MISS FORREST: I want you to be the first to hear of my happiness, for you have always been so kind over and interested in my little—I was going to say, but I mean big, all-embracing, Heaven-sent *affaire de cœur*. Wen's mother is dead. And her death—ah, how pathetic!—means happiness to me. For now there is nothing to prevent our marriage. When he left me, after the funeral, he said: ‘Virginia, I am coming to see you in a day or so. I want to tell you something. You alone of all people in the world may be able to help me to find—happiness. When may I come?’ His meaning was—well, any woman would have known what he meant, wouldn't she? So I am just waiting, hugging my happiness to my heart, waiting till he comes.

“And will you think me foolish, I wonder? I have unearthed a white gown I wore years ago when I was a girl. He liked me in it, and a red rose I wore behind my ear. Oh, how silly I am! How very silly! But I have washed and ironed the frock, and though large for me now, for I am thin as a rail, it can be

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made to 'do.' And the red rose I shall buy—one of those great, dewy, luscious fellows with cheeks of damask velvet.

"And so my working days will be at an end. I shall close down my typewriter—think of it!—and pumice-stone the ink-stains from my fingers, and shut the office door for ever.

"Good-bye. I hope we shall meet again in the happy future, for I liked you well, Miss Forrest. You were the only girl I knew with whom I didn't feel old, and didn't feel plain. How did you manage this? It was clever and nice of you.

"Your most sincere and affectionate friend,

"VIRGINIA RYE."

For a long while I sat with my eyes on the water—seeing nothing, hearing nothing.

Presently Abinadab came along with a wheelbarrow and some tools, and with a little shiver I came back to the world.

"Want a job to-day, Miss Hilary?" he enquired, pleasantly.

"Perhaps, Abinadab, later on."

"Eh, but I forgot. You're goin' back to London and your work. Aren't you, Miss Hilary? And you'll be stoppin' feelin' like a horse with its belly full of oats and no exercise."

I shook my head. "No, I've changed my mind. I am not returning to London after all. So—this afternoon I might want a job."

"Is there anythink the matter, Miss Hilary? Your eyes are so big and dazed-like; you might have been seein' a ghost."

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I rose from the stone and climbed the bank. "No, not a ghost, but, curiously enough, a figure in white, a little figure and a big red rose, a rose like this." I stooped and gathered one. "Strange, eh, Abinadab?"

I walked across the lawn a little unsteadily and went into the house.

Mother met me on the stairs. She stopped me by laying a hand on my shoulder, and asked me what was the matter. Her voice was kind, and her manner was sympathetic. Touched, I stooped and kissed her cheek, and was passing on without replying when she said: "You won't tell me?"

"It isn't that I won't, mother," I replied, "but it is so difficult. Some day perhaps. . . ."

"You have told Miranda?"

"Yes."

"And yet I am your mother."

"I have always told everything to Miranda. Don't you find it easy to tell things to her, mother?"

"I never have anything to tell."

"No, I suppose not. But if you had, wouldn't you go to Miranda?"

"Perhaps." And she passed on with a little sigh while I went in to my bedroom, and unlocked my trunk.

It took me a long time to unpack and put away my clothes; firstly because my legs and hands *would* tremble, and it was a long walk from the trunk to the chest of drawers; and, secondly, because Miranda would sit on her bed and watch me with troubled eyes. But I persevered, and when the last pair of shoes and last ribbon and hat had been put neatly

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away I said: "I am going to Windy Heights, and I don't want even you, Miranda. You won't mind, and I will take some lunch."

"No," she said, "I don't mind. I shall be busy. I am going to write to Mr. Westcott. I thought it honourable to inform you of my intention." There was a something in her voice I had never heard before, and her lips were set straight and compressed.

"No, you won't."

"Yes!" she cried, springing to her feet and blazing into sudden wrath. "There has been enough of this tomfoolery. I will not sit down while you muddle away your life. Happiness by the good God has been offered to you, and you simply fling it away and trample it in the dust. Virginia Rye must find another way to happiness; it shan't be through you. I have sketched out a rough copy of the letter I mean to send. I wrote it while you were mooning in the mist by the river."

"May I see it?" I asked.

"No."

"You might?"

"Well"—she pushed it at me—"I shan't alter a word."

"All right."

"DEAR MR. WESTCOTT"—I read aloud—"I am Miranda Forrest—Hilary's sister—so that is my excuse for writing to you. Hilary is poorly and wretched. She loves you, all right, and only refused you from some stupid, quixhotic [Miranda's spelling was not her best point] reason; and, out of loyalty to another girl, I mean woman, who also has the mis-

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fortune to love you. So cheer up, and I am sure Hilary will marry you in the end.

"Yours sincerely,

"MIRANDA FORREST."

"I don't think that remark about misfortune is very polite," I observed, handing her back the letter.

"Oh, he'll understand."

"But you are not really going to send it?"

"Certainly. I don't write letters for fun."

"Will you wait a little, say—till next week?"

"Why?"

"Owen may have been to see Miss Rye by then."

"But you say he has often been to see her."

"Yes, but this is a special visit—she mentions it in the letter I received this morning."

"Very well," said Miranda, grudgingly, "but I don't believe in putting off things."

CHAPTER XXXII

VIRGINIA EYE FINDS A WAY OUT

MIRANDA kept her promise to me and waited till the following week, and then a morning came when she said she should post her letter to Owen. Mother's comments upon my appearance had been unusually unflattering, and Miranda had volunteered that I was not sleeping. Whereupon mother suggested that a visit to the sea might be beneficial, with Miranda as company for me—a suggestion I caught at with eagerness till I discovered Blackpool was the place mother had in her mind's eye.

"It is so bracing," said she.

"Yes," said I, "that is the excuse all people make for places which are horrid." But mother didn't think Blackpool *was* horrid, but she *did* think some people were mighty particular to please.

"I would rather stay at home." And as I spoke Miranda was edging towards the writing-table, and for Miranda to write a letter was an unusual occurrence.

"You are writing to Owen?" I enquired as mother left the room to tell cook we would have a boiled sheep's head for dinner.

Miranda nodded.

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"I call it rather officious."

She pursed her lips and looked up a word in the dictionary.

"Perhaps if you were to wait a little longer something might happen."

"Pigs might fly?" she suggested impolitely, scribbling hard.

"Owen may have found out by this time that he really loves Virginia. A man refused by one woman frequently finds consolation in another."

"Of course if he's that sort he's not worth bothering about," she pronounced, addressing an envelope.

Mother came into the room with a large parcel in her arms, which she requested us to take to Sabrina Rowden's. "It's my mantle," she explained. "Sabrina is going to do it up with a new chiffon ruching."

"Not your old mantle?" exclaimed grandmother, who was announced while mother was speaking.

"If you call it old; I've only had it five years." Mother was slightly offended. And grandmother said, laughing, if only she would consign it to the ash-pit she would present her with a new one. But mother didn't want any new mantle. What she wanted was her old bengaline retrimmed by Sabrina. It was quite good enough for Ridgemoor. Only the mill-hands dressed in Ridgemoor. To be quietly and unassumingly garbed was the hall-mark of a lady.

"So you are still at home, Hilary?" said grandmother, abandoning the mantle and fixing me with her searching eyes.

I nodded carelessly and strolled towards the door, as we had ever been in the habit of strolling when

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our maternal grandmother was anywhere in the near neighbourhood. But to my surprise she stopped me—a half-pained, half-amused expression flitting across her small, handsome face. “Why do you always run away as soon as I enter a room?” she demanded.

“I—I don’t. But I am going to Sabrina Rowden’s, and want to put on my hat.”

“I knew you would tell a lie,” she said, calmly. Then suddenly taking my hand, and dropping her voice, she said: “I know you are in trouble, Hilary, and I am sorry, and would like to help you. Is there anything I can do? I am fond of you, child; though, goodness knows! I haven’t had much cause. But I don’t like to see your white face and wide, sorrowful eyes. Young people should be happy and gay. Will you come away with me—abroad—Scotland, the sea, anywhere you like?” She dropped her eyes as she spoke, as one who is ashamed of being found out about something.

“Grandmother,” I said, “you are very kind. Everybody is so good to me for some reason. And I—I am beginning to find out such a lot of things about my home people——”

“Yes?” she asked. “What are they?”

“Only that they are so much nicer than I thought they were, and I am so much—nastier,” I replied, in a shamed voice.

“Ah!” she said, with a little, grim smile. “You are beginning to progress. It’s only when people make the discovery you have just made that their characters start to grow.”

I looked at her in surprise, and as I looked she

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smiled again. "Perhaps you have been really quite nice all along?" I queried. And now she laughed outright. "There's no telling," said she. "Hilary, are you coming away with me?"

"I should like to," I replied. "But will you wait for my answer till the week is out? I—I am expecting a letter, grandmother."

"Very well," she agreed, "and pray God the letter will come soon," she added, softly.

And as Miranda and I walked up Windy Hill with mother's parcel, and the letter to Owen held firmly in my sister's hand, Giles, the postman, could be seen coming along in the distance.

"Wait," I said as Miranda stepped to the letter box. "Giles is coming. He may have something for me."

"I am tired of waiting," she demurred. "I have waited for a week, and you look downright ill. I shall post it and have done with it. You won't send for Mr. Westcott, so I must."

"One moment," I cried, seizing her arm; "here is Giles. Giles, have you anything for me?" I shouted.

"Yes, Miss Hilary. One letter"—he searched his bag. "There it is. Will save me going down to the bottom." He touched his hat, and turning, retraced his steps up the hill.

A fierce disappointment seized me as I turned the letter over in my hand and examined the writing. It was neither from Owen nor Virginia, but from Mr. Weldon. Why couldn't Virginia write and put my miserable suspense at an end? Had Owen found consolation in her tender affection and sympathy?

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Again and again during the last dragging days had I seen her in the white gown and a red rose in her hair—Owen liked airy, pretty, summer frocks and feminine fripperies. I saw her great dark eyes lit up with happiness and laughter, her slim, delicate fingers moving about among the cups and saucers, for she would give him coffee of her own making. And there would be flowers on the table—I had known her go without lunch in order to have the money to buy flowers—and Owen would sit in the easy chair by the open window and note all the refinement and originality which, in spite of the shabbiness, pervaded the room; the good prints on the wall, the artistic colour scheme, and books everywhere—history, poetry, philosophy. Maeterlinck rubbing shoulders with Carlyle, Pierre Loti with Ibsen and Lafcadio Hearn. And Owen, too, loved books. They had much in common. And, after all, sympathy of tastes, good comradeship . . .

“I wonder when you are going to read your letter?” Miranda leant against the low lichen-covered wall and detached crumbly bits of mortar from between the loosely-knit stones. “People who turn an envelope over and over whilst staring at it with a peculiarly vacant expression are so exasperating.”

“I am sorry,” I said. “It’s only from Mr. Weldon, and I expected something much more interesting. It seems to me, Miranda, that life is made up of expectations which in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred are never realised.”

“Perhaps. But I don’t want to philosophise about life just now. Let’s hear what Mr. Weldon has got to say. I suppose he is once again begging you to

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toes, "one of Miss Hilary's favourite dishes," and bake for the evening meal; and everybody invited me to sit in the easiest chair in the drawing-room. How impossible it is to make some people comprehend that your stomach does not hanker after stuffed tomatoes and rock-cakes when your soul is still stunned by its first impact with death.

Virginia was dead. I shivered and held out cold hands to the radiant warmth of the sun, which was near to setting. She had closed down her typewriter for ever, her dull life was at an end.

But had it been so dull? Could it have been as narrow, sordid, as I had imagined, when irradiated by a love such as she bore for Owen? Miranda had been preaching this throughout the day. Some women are content simply to love, to give, to serve. They ask nothing in return.

"But she was not that sort," I had cried.

"And so God took her away," said my sister, with the unshakable belief in the tactical and administrative qualities of the Almighty at all crises of life.

And when I suggested that as an alternative He might have taken me, she replied that He knew His business too well; that I was not ready, and Virginia apparently was.

I drew away from the shadow of the beech to the river and stepped across to the stone above the weir. The water purled round me as I sat, every now and again splashing diamond dewdrops on to my skirt. Myriads of tiny insects danced about in the still air. Did they realise the sun was fast dipping behind the hill? Soon the pleasant warmth would be gone, and so they must make the most of what was

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left before folding up their wings and creeping to rest among the leaves and flowers. A rat shot out from the bank and swam across the stream to the Pratts' garden. A squirrel, with small, lithe body and wide, bushy tail, utterly indifferent to my proximity, scampered among the branches of a sycamore. A wren twittered in a willow, dipping thirsty leaves into the cool water.

The day had been hot, one of those soft, windless days which comes to us in early September, and now with the cool of the evening wonderful scents of sweet-pea and tobacco plant, mignonette and stock stole along the garden. I was very weary, and gradually the peace and beauty of the earth entered into my being, soothing and comforting me. Is there anything like the earth with the strong, clean smell of it, for bringing peace to God's tired children?

Father came slowly down the lawn, his heels slipping in and out of his shoes, his spare frame wrapped about in the home-made alpaca coat—had his last remnant of sartorial pride broken down before the endless coercion of the economical Spirit who ruled the house? His white hair was rumpled as though perplexed fingers had been running through it, and an expression of worry lay upon his dear face. He stood among the sun-dyed branches on the sloping bank and looked at me a little anxiously.

"Yes, father?" I smiled.

"Oh, you're not crying?" The anxiety gave way to relief.

"Not now."

"That's right." He bent over a bowl he was carrying which contained hard-boiled eggs, and with a

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knife carefully chopped them fine. "I—I just wondered how you were getting on."

"It was kind of you, father. Won't you come and sit with me? There's not much room for two, but I could screw up small."

"No, I think not. I must go and feed the pullets. They *must* lay before the month is out."

"Isn't it rather late in the evening to give them such indigestible stuff?"

"No; I believe in feeding all animals just before they sleep."

"I will come with you," I said, climbing up the bank and slipping my arm through his. "Father, I want to ask you something. You know so much."

"Well, my dear?"

"Do you believe in compensation—compensation in this life and the life to come?"

He paused in front of a hedge of sweet-peas and deftly twined a wandering tendril around a tall stick. Then he said thoughtfully: "Yes, I do. Or how should one live?" In my absorption I hardly noted the touch of weariness in his voice.

"There will be compensation for all?" I queried eagerly. "For all who have toiled and worked and been disappointed and sad in this world?"

"For all who have done their best, their very best, whatever their handicap."

"It is a comfortable doctrine."

"And a reasonable one, don't you think?" He stooped and removed a slug from a lettuce. "If——"

"Yes?"

"If one believes in the justice of God."

"And do you?"

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"I think so, Hilary."

"Thank you, father. You are sometimes a very comforting person."

"There!" he said, with a smile. "There is my compensation."

"For what?"

"Oh, for all sorts of things," he replied evasively. "I have done so little in this life that I think I shall have to buck up a bit in the world to come, don't you, Hilary? There will be room for the failures——"

"Father dear," I whispered, kissing his beautiful hair, "whatever you do, and wherever you are, just be exactly your own dear self, and heaven will be such an attractive place for those who were weary of the bustling people who 'did things' in this world."

"But *you* wanted to 'do things'?" he smiled.

"That seems a long while ago," I sighed. And forgetting my proposal to accompany him to the poultry yard, I retraced my steps to the river and again sat down on the stone to think things out.

And while I sat somebody else came down the lawn—not slowly, but quickly, and also stood amongst the bracken on the slope close to the river and looked at me. And I think I felt no surprise that it should be Owen Westcott, only a great gladness and a still greater relief that he should be there to tell me if Virginia had passed into the Great Silence with contentment in her heart or—otherwise. If otherwise, then must I find courage to send him away.

For a moment we looked at one another. And then, as though unconsciously, he held out his arms, and said in a voice tremulous with passion: "Won't you come to me, little Hilary? Or are you still a tanta-

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"She died with a smile on her lips," he replied very gently, "and—I am sure she was quite happy, Hilary." With a movement I could see was unconscious and most reverent, he lifted his hat as he spoke, and, as in a flash, I knew that he knew Virginia's secret and—she died with a smile on her lips.

"Ah!" My cry of happiness was surely repeated by the song of the weir, and the murmur of moving beech leaves, and the wind amongst the bracken.

"And you may kiss me now, Owen," I whispered. And sorrow slipped away as his strong arms closed around me, and he laid his lips on mine.

* * * * *

"Hilary!" Miranda's voice came down the shadowy garden, "mother says you are to come in at once. She won't have you behaving like a mill girl."

"Are we behaving like mill hands?" laughed Owen.

"You are, most certainly," I returned promptly. "And they know you are here?"

He nodded. "Within five minutes after my arrival at the Garden House I had met your entire family; your father, your mother, your sisters, two servants, peeping at me from behind partly closed doors, a third respectfully holding my hat in her hand, and while I was humbly enquiring if I might be allowed to see you, a very handsome, diminutive old lady marched into the hall, and after a prolonged stare, remarked: 'So you're the man, are you? Not been shown into the drawing-room for fear you're a tramp, eh? Glad you've turned up. You look all right. Hilary's in the garden, mooning by the river, catching her death of cold. You'd better go to her.'

"So I came. I guessed I should like your grand-

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mother, and I do. Your sister, Miranda, is very pretty. I suppose *she* sent the telegram?"

He was regarding me with bantering eyes.

"I suppose so, and most officious of her——"

"HILARY!"

"Yes, we're coming as fast as we can. And I want a few words with you about that telegram, Miranda. I think it was most——"

"Oh, don't begin to lecture." She drew nearer. "If only you had seen your countenance——"

"What about it?"

"I expect you'll be offended, but you have asked. Your eyes were like pulpy slices of beet-root, your nose like a bruised peony, your mouth——"

"I don't want to hear any more," I interrupted.

"Your mouth like an inverted saucer. So I thought it was high time to send for Mr. Westcott before you became permanently hideous. And I hope you'll be married soon. I can see that otherwise I shall spend my entire time trailing about this damp garden after you. Now, George and I——"

"George and you!"

"Yes, George and I," she continued calmly, "are doing our courting in the back parlour, much to mother and Mrs. Pratt's satisfaction and approval. We shall always be correct and commonplace."

"Oh, Miranda!" I cried, "I *am* glad. Do wait for me to hug you." She had turned on her heel and was hurrying up the lawn.

"No," she called back. "I've had enough for one evening. I—I mean you've had enough." She turned about, and the light streaming through the open hall door caught her lovely, flushed face. "Mother has

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been in the pantry for the last hour pretending to write on the new pickle jars, but—the pantry window embraces a good view of the river, you know; hence her remark about mill girls, and she is now considering the proposition: ‘Should young ladies wear white when——,’ ”

“Hush!” I commanded, closing her lips with my hand, and laughingly the three of us went into the house.

THE END



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